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Ace-High Western Stories

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

JUNE

MAGAZINE

ONE MORE NESTER GU
A SMASHING RANGE-WAR NOV
by
ROBERT I MAHAFFA

L. E. REEVE
•
JOHN G. PEARSOL
•
AND OTHERS

LINE RIDER OF THE BIG DIE
A NOVELETTE
F .45 CALIBRE COUR
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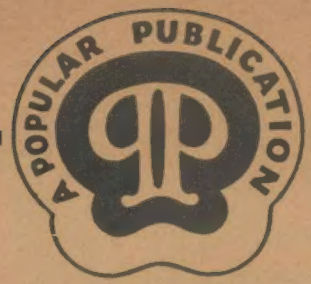

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Black and ruinous war clouds were building over the Elktown range, on the echoing thunder of a shot that young Con Allard never meant to fire. . . . Could this conscience-cursed cowboy redeem himself by drawing the storm's full blast down on himself?

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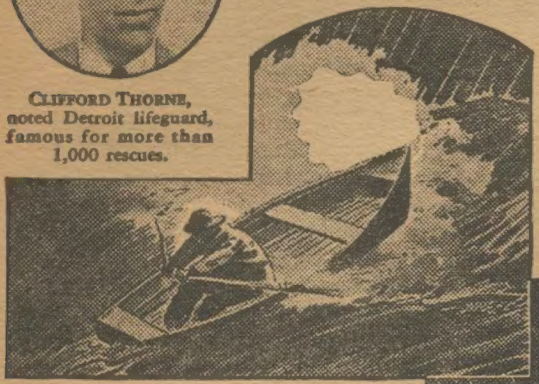
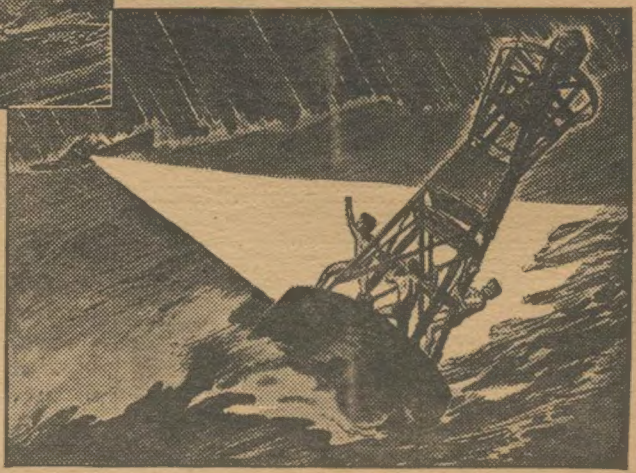
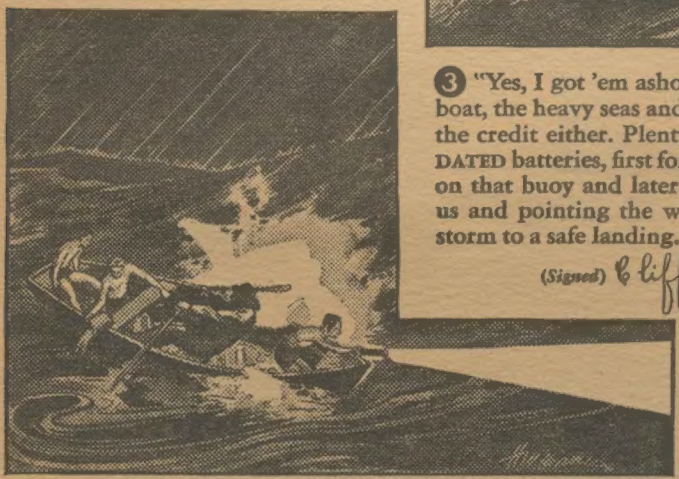


❶ "I stayed out on Lake St. Claire until well after dark fishing," writes Clifford Thorne of 716 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, Mich. "As I started rowing home a terrific squall hit. Rowing was almost impossible and the rain was so heavy it blotted out lights half a mile away. And then, over the howl of the wind I thought I heard cries for help.



❷ "But I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. I thought of the powerful, focusing flashlight that lay on the back seat, reached cautiously for it and played it around me... *and there they were!* Three youngsters clinging in terror to a rocking sea buoy. They had tried the usual stunt of swimming out to the buoy and back, but the storm spoiled the plan.



❸ "Yes, I got 'em ashore safely, in spite of an overloaded boat, the heavy seas and the heavy rain, and I can't take all the credit either. Plenty of it belongs to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, first for finding the lads on that buoy and later for standing by us and pointing the way through that storm to a safe landing.

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What's In A Name?

BY Western tradition, it's downright rude to pry into a newcomer's past. His business, his reputation, his antecedents, even his name, are all his own concern—unless he wants to state them. He's accepted on face value, and if he makes good, in terms of the Western code, that is all that matters.

A man who has made one or two missteps, and has a dark chapter in his career that he wants to forget, may start over without the interference of busybody neighbors. Many a man has done exactly that—wiped the slate clean, taken a new name, and with courage and integrity, built a proud and honorable life on the ashes of yesteryear.

When it is so easy to erase the past and start anew, it takes a special kind of courage to cling to a name and reputation that have been defamed. Yet there were men who did that, too. And some of them, apparently stubborn and a little mad in the way they faced the odds they might have avoided, managed to clear their muddled names.

It's hard, though, to understand how an hombre like Wade Cannon figured. His brother was Red Rush Cannon, whose reputation as a bank robber and cold-blooded killer was known from one end of the Rio Grande to the other. Wade could spend years building up his Border cow-spread by honest effort, and winning the respect of his neighbors—yet, so long as he traveled under the accursed Cannon name, one five-minute foray of his brother would knock it all down like a house of cards.

But there was pride in Wade Cannon. Even after Red Rush Cannon's band smashed the White Pine bank, and ruined a dozen of Wade's neighbors, he held onto that pride. He'd be damned if he'd quit, and start over someplace else.

Every man in the range was against him. When the drought came, when hay was scarce as dollars, when it looked like the coming winter would complete the wipeout, there was no one to help him. But he'd tough it out.

After two months in the wild-horse hills, easing scary mustang bands down toward his canyon trap, it looked as if success was in sight. Two hundred head of horses would bring enough to tide him over. There'd be money to pay for hay

and his crew's back wages. It'd be a life-giving breather for his little ranch—at a time when trying to raise a loan at the White Pine bank would have been just as ridiculous as expecting to pick dollar bills off the prickly pear bushes of the brasada.

Wade lifted an exultant shout as the two hundred mustangs poured through the brush-masked wings, and into the trap. There was wild triumph in his eyes as he raced up at breakneck speed, hitting the ground in a flying leap. He rushed to close the entrance with the net of webbed rope that he had left in readiness.

Abruptly he froze in his tracks, staring with eyes that went slowly dead with numb and chagrin and disbelief.

He was looking into the circular corral that he had built with such painstaking care, but instead of finding it filled with a churning band of captured mustangs, all that he saw was an empty haze of swirling dust. Receding in his ears was the thunder of the mustang herd, racing on down the draw.

He walked mechanically across the empty trap. He stared at the gap in the barrier. The cedar posts, that he had set deep in the earth, and braced stoutly, had been pulled up. Pole bars were scattered around in the grass.

A savage cry of fury came from him. The horses could never have broken through that barrier. His trap had been wrecked deliberately by men!

Here it was again. His neighbors' hatred—born of the past, of the unsavory family name he had struggled to clear of dishonor—had struck again. Would his pride, and his courageous honesty, survive this crushing blow? Or would he turn to those dark trails to which his neighbors seemed so intent on driving him? His fighting heart had to find the answer.

And the answer it found forms the tough, unbending backbone of an epic of Western manhood that will appear in next month's *Ace-High*. Cliff Farrell is author of Wade Cannon's courageous life story, a complete action-novel—"One-Man Wild Bunch"... July *Ace-High* will be out May 19th!

—THE EDITOR

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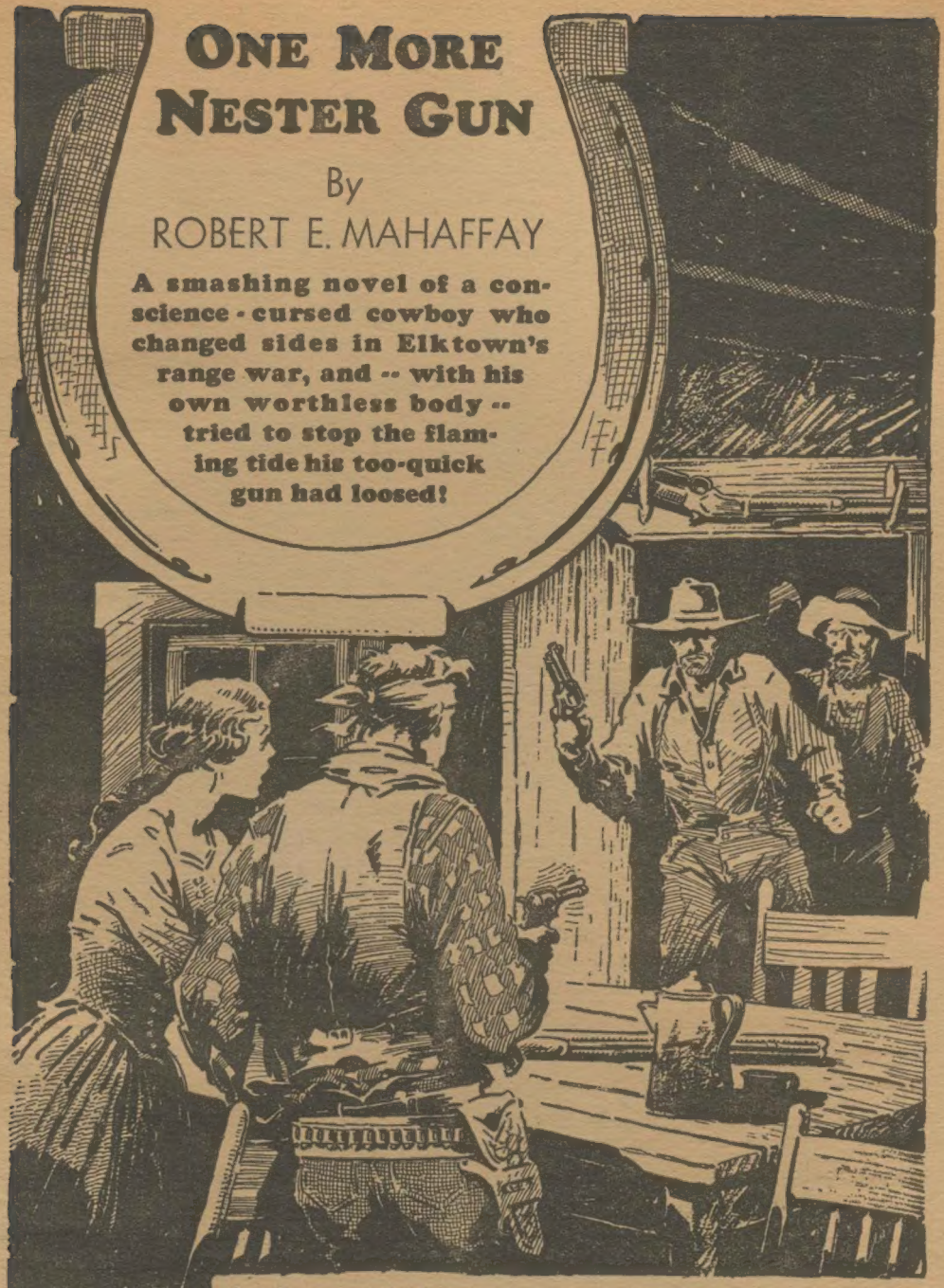
ONE MORE NESTER GUN

By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

A smashing novel of a conscience-cursed cowboy who changed sides in Elktown's range war, and -- with his own worthless body -- tried to stop the flaming tide his too-quick gun had loosed!



Len Royce was the first man in. He came treading carefully, his gun out.

CHAPTER ONE

Three Seconds From Hell

THE scraggly tar-paper shack in the clump of willows by the creek looked as if it had been picked up and thrown from about twenty feet away. It made Con Allard downright sick as his squinting eyes picked it out. That

was the hell of having nesters around. They didn't know how to do anything. Couldn't even put up a cabin that a man wouldn't ride a mile out of his way to avoid seeing.

Even the creek, which this fellow thought was life-giving, had dried up until it was merely a string of scummy pools. And next spring, when it roared to life, it would probably snatch the shack out of those willows like a wolf picking off a stray calf.

The nester, though, wouldn't mind that. He wouldn't be here.

Con Allard's young face drew into a frown. He wished the job hadn't been shoved off on him. Maybe Banty Morrow figured that sending one of the older hands might lead to serious trouble.

"Don't get any tougher than you have to," Morrow had said. "Just tell him."

Les Beddow, standing by, had chuckled, "Keep yore eye peeled, kid. I've seen clod-hoppin' nesters that had ideas about gun-handlin'."

Kidding him, of course. Like they were most of the time.

Con Allard's lean fist dropped to the butt of the .44 at his hip. He pulled the hand away with a wry look downward. What the hell! He wasn't going to shoot anybody.

The leggy buckskin Allard rode wasn't hurrying, and Allard didn't urge him. No rush about it. He pulled the sleeve of a black and white checkered shirt across his forehead. Lord, it was hot. It was as if the sun were ladling molten metal over an earth already scorched. He reflected that if it didn't rain pretty soon the Bent Arrow would ship some mighty gaunt beef in the fall.

The blows of an axe came with ringing clarity through the dry air. Allard pulled up in front of the shack and was on the verge of calling out when the door opened. A girl stood there.

Allard got only a brief glimpse of her —a print dress with short sleeves, dark hair that curled, a scrutiny from dark eyes so direct that it made a flush crawl up his neck.

He didn't look at her again. Didn't want to. She meant more grief. There'd be tears and some yelling, he guessed, when they learned why he'd come. To avoid meeting her stare, he reached for papers and his Durham sack.

"What do you want here?" There was an uncompromising directness about her voice.

"A man named Saunders," he said. "I want to talk to him." Damn that tell-tale stain showing even under the bronze of his lean cheeks! He could feel it.

"If you're from the Bent Arrow," she said, "don't bother. He won't want to talk to you."

SLIDING his tongue along the edge of the paper, Allard let his glance drift across her casually, as if it were on its way to inspect the distant mountains. The brand on the buckskin's flank was pretty well haired over; she hadn't noticed it apparently.

"What he wants he ain't likely to get," Allard said bluntly.

An older woman came and stood at the girl's shoulder. He could feel their scorn and their anger and their hatred. It made Con Allard angry, too. They had no right here; they were trespassers, land thieves.

He put out his jaw a little, figuring it would conceal the youth in his face. He was only nineteen, but he had been working around cattle for over eleven years. He was glad he hadn't shaved that morning.

A stick snapped under tramping boots, and Saunders came around the corner of the shack. He was a deliberate man, with a dogged, heavy-boned face and smoldering eyes. He set his double-bitted axe against the shack's side and faced Allard

with his hands on his hips. Above homespun jeans tucked into worn boots he wore only underwear; the sleeves had been cut off at the shoulders.

"Bent Arrow?" he demanded at once.

Allard nodded, not missing the gun belted about Saunders' hips. The nester didn't even have sense enough to take care of a piece of leather. Long unoiled, the holster was cracked and rotten.

"Then get off my land."

"That's what I'm here to tell you." It upset Allard to have the play taken out of his hands. "The land ain't yours. Never has been an' never will be."

The bulldoggish set to Saunders' face increased. "Mister, that game don't go down. I filed on this piece all regular an' proper, an' no damned land-hoggin' outfit is goin' to make me move."

"The land along this creek wasn't open for settlement," Allard explained, struggling for patience. "The Bent Arrow bought up all the water, over a year ago."

"Not this piece, they didn't. I've heard all about the kind of bluff the Bent Arrow throws. You can run back an' tell your Banty Morrow to go plumb to hell!"

It was irritating to be ordered about by a nester; it was irritating to have the Bent Arrow slurred. "This ain't bluff," Allard said grimly.

Saunders' hands tightened on his hips, and the muscles of his bare arms roped under the sun-burned skin. He blurted wrathfully, "Try it on me an' you'll run into more gun-grief than you figger on. Get off my place, damn you! Hit that trail an' keep movin'!"

"The Bent Arrow don't take orders," Allard snapped. "It gives 'em." He was thoroughly aware of the two women, who were adding scorn to the defeat Saunders was administering.

Saunders' hand dropped to the butt of his gun. "Get off my land," he repeated. "Get off it, or by the Eternal, I'll blast you off with lead!"

IN Con Allard's gray-blue eyes was the light of stubbornness and anger. He couldn't slink away from this nester like a hound dog kicked into a gutter. Hell, when he got back to the Bent Arrow—

He began to roll another cigarette. Slouching indolently in the saddle, he let his deliberate, insolent absorption in the task convey his refusal.

Saunders roared furiously, "You got three seconds! When they're done you sure as hell better be movin'!"

Con Allard went on spilling tawny flakes into the cupped paper. No damned nester was going to bluff him or the Bent Arrow. Hell, Saunders wasn't going to shoot. He knew blamed well he didn't have any more legal rights than a jackrabbit.

Saunders' hoarse voice, counting, came to him: "One—two—three—"

Con Allard yelled, "Hey, you damn fool!"

Tobacco and paper scattered from his fingers as he lurched to one side, diving for his gun. Saunders' weapon blasted viciously—and was followed a split-second later by the .44's sharp slap.

Where Saunders' bullet went, Con Allard never knew. There was a queer look of torture on the nester's dogged, heavy face. He lifted a powerful arm to reach for the side of the cabin, missed it by two feet and crashed on his side into the dust.

There was a single, muffled scream from the women. Con Allard's heart began to labor in his chest. Lord, he hadn't meant—it had come so fast—jumping sideways like that, with a gun exploding in his face, a man couldn't tell where his bullet—

He stuffed the .44 back into its holster, as if to hide it.

By the time he got out of the saddle the two women were bending over Saunders, their full dresses hiding him. He could see the older woman's face. She wasn't sobbing, but there were two wet

paths running down across her weather-roughened cheeks.

She was whispering, "Jack! Jack! Jack!" over and over again.

Con Allard said huskily, "Where's he hit? I didn't mean—"

Nobody paid any attention to him, and he said, "I'll give you a hand gettin' him inside. Then I'll get a doctor out here. The Bent Arrow will pay for it."

The girl whirled toward him furiously. "You can't touch him!" she cried. "We don't need the Bent Arrow." Her fierceness and contempt had the strength of a blow.

Con Allard could only stand there while the two women lifted Saunders between them, staggering with his weight. Saunders' eyes were closed. There was a spreading patch of red on the buttoned front of his underwear.

They got him in somehow, shut the door. Con Allard stood there, with the sweat running down his face, staring. It wasn't his fault, he tried to tell himself. Saunders had no business here, in the first place, trying to grab a chunk of Bent Arrow land. The man was a thief, an outlaw.

But he couldn't rub out the memory of Saunders reaching for the support of the cabin wall and not finding it, or the memory of the woman's rough, wet cheeks. There hadn't been any weeping or hysterics. Just hatred—for him and the Bent Arrow.

He felt a little sick as he wondered if Saunders—with his dogged face, his sweat-stained underwear, his unoiled leather holster—was going to die.

Maybe Saunders hadn't meant to hit him with that one quick shot he had fired. The lead hadn't even come close. Maybe Saunders had just intended to scare him off.

He thought, "Hell, they're gettin' a sawbones whether they want one or not. An' the Bent Arrow's payin' for it."

IT was better than a three hours' ride into Elktown. Allard pushed the buckskin recklessly and made it before dark. He found the doctor in a poker game, told him the Bent Arrow was good for the bill, and got him started. That helped a little toward getting the sick, empty feeling out of his belly.

The buckskin was done in. On a pony borrowed at the livery stable Con Allard headed for the Bent Arrow. Riding through the dark over the still-hot prairie, he wondered what Banty Morrow was going to say. Nothing mattered to Morrow quite as much as the Bent Arrow. It was his life blood. He had brought cattle north from Texas twenty years ago and he had lived and eaten and slept cattle ever since.

It was past midnight when Allard pulled in among the Bent Arrow buildings. There was still a light in the big ranchhouse. He turned the borrowed horse into the corral and went tramping up there, his mouth dry.

Banty Morrow was sprawled in a leather chair in front of the fireplace, which held a blaze in spite of the night's heat. When Allard came in he got up and spilled whiskey into a glass.

"Take a slug, son. You'll feel better."

A pine knot in the fireplace cracked like a pistol shot, and Con Allard's hand jerked. Morrow already knew.

"He—he ain't dead, is he, Banty?"

Morrow nodded. "When you didn't show up, I sent Beddow over there. Some fool woman pointed a scattergun at his jaw. That's what she said."

"I kept tellin' him," said Allard huskily. "I kept tellin' him it was Bent Arrow land. He wouldn't believe me."

"Yeah." Morrow looked at his glass.

Something about the way he said it rasped across Con's awareness. "Well, it is, isn't it? Didn't the Bent Arrow buy up all that creek land?"

Banty Morrow went over and, with a

poker, pulled the ashy embers together. The glow highlighted his thick red mustache and his eyes, which were black and fiery, like pits of burning coal. He was a small man, no more than seven inches over five feet, tough and hard as a harness strap.

"We aimed to," he said crisply. "Saunders beat us out by a whisker, but that don't change the fact that it's always been Bent Arrow range an' always will be."

Con Allard set his glass down on the table, hard. "Then he had legal title to it?" he blurted.

"Not unless his claim stands up in court—which it won't."

It seemed to Con Allard that he wasn't going to get the words out of his throat. They stuck there, choking him, before he gasped, "But, hell, Banty, if Saunders is dead, that's murder!"

BANTY MORROW rocked over on bowed legs to put a rope-gnarled hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy, son. The law through here ain't nester law. It's cattle law. Most likely there won't be any charge at all. If there is, you can be damned sure the Bent Arrow will see to it that it don't stick."

And after a bit he added, "Cripes, son, you've come along with this outfit since you were a button. You won't get the dirty end of the stick now. Puttin' a slug in a man is tough to take at first, but maybe it's a good thing. It'll show the rest of that bunch where to head in. It's either them or the Bent Arrow—you know that, don't you?"

Con Allard nodded automatically. Morrow reached for the whiskey bottle, found it was empty, and said, "There's another in that cabinet under the desk. Get it, will you?"

While he was doing that, the beat of hoofs came from the yard. Con Allard barely heard them. Groping in the dark corner, he was thinking with a queer throat-tightness of the eleven years he had spent here on the Bent Arrow with Banty Morrow. He couldn't remember much of what had gone before. There were little scattered recollections, like fragments from a dream, and then the big memory of the fire in which his father had died.

He remembered that, because his father had promised to take him fishing. Then Jared Allard had fallen ill, had taken to his bunk. And that night had come the fire.

It was Banty Morrow who had pulled him out of the blazing cabin. Banty Morrow's hands still bore the scars of the flames. After the fire, they had waited two weeks before telling Con that his father had died.

Voices jerked Con Allard out of the past. When he straightened, with the bottle in his hand, Banty Morrow was at the door saying bluntly, "What the hell do you mean—take him in? It wasn't murder, an' you know it!"

Sheriff Ben Lake, wide-shouldered and long of jaw, backed Banty Morrow unhurriedly into the room. "Saunders is dead. I went out with Doc Lacey. Hell, Banty, it's got to go through the channels."

"Who put you in office?" snapped Morrow. "Sound cowmen who built up this country, or a handful of fly-by-night nesters?"

Lake stared across Banty Morrow's stubborn shoulder at Allard. "It ain't a question of that. I don't say the charge will stick. I don't think it will. But you know how it would look if I just sat on my tail an' didn't put up any kind of a show. He's got to go in with me. You can bail him out in the morning."

Banty Morrow swung around, his black eyes narrowed and flaming. "All right, son. We'll do it that way. We'll have you out of that calaboose by morning, if it takes every pound of beef on the Bent Arrow to do it!"

CHAPTER TWO

Guns Give the Verdict

TO Con Allard, that ride in to Elktown with stolid Ben Lake, the night in the six-by-ten cell, Banty Morrow's arrival and the signing of the bond, passed like an evil dream.

Nothing was real again until he and Banty were riding back out to the Bent Arrow and Banty Morrow was saying grimly, "It's two weeks till the trial, kid. Get your belly full of cow work an' forget it." He nodded his head toward the sun-blasted hills.

There was work enough—the kind of work that turns a cowman heartsick and murderous. Unpleasant heat had become drought overnight. It hits that way. A cowman watches it come, figuring that another day or so, maybe a week, will see the end of the dry spell. Then all at once it isn't a dry spell any more, but drought; steady, scorching heat that means dead calves, bloating carcasses, and only fouled muddy pits where water holes used to be.

Con Allard threw the full weight of his young strength into the work that had to be done, dimly hoping that exhaustion would wipe out the doubts storming in his head.

During the days that followed, sleep was to be had only in snatches. It was sleep haunted by the real nightmares of the burning days—beef steers that were hollow-sided, wasted, unfit for shipping; gaunt cows that licked with dry swollen tongues at incessantly bawling calves, or wandered at a staggering walk in an endless search for water which didn't exist.

The two water holes which remained had to be cleaned and dug out. Fences which amounted almost to stockades were thrown up around them.

The section of the herd that ranged the higher hills had to be drifted down, carefully. The cattle were watered in bunches. Each bunch was allowed so much water and no more.

Arms grew leaden with rope-swinging, throats sand-papery with yelling. Clogging dust boiled up in a great pall that never diminished. Cloven hoofs churned without respite. And over all of it—a maddening voice like that of endlessly rushing wind—was the bawling of thirsty cattle.

It was in Con Allard's head; it was in his bones and in his blood. He was a cowman, and there was a cowman's work to be done.

What lay ahead of him he might have forced out of his mind, but Blacky Jeddling, riding into Elktown after supplies, returned with disturbing reports. The plight of the homesteaders was even more severe. The scummy pools of the creek had vanished. A well or two that had been sunk were going dry.

Ugly rumors were going the rounds. Someone had rooted out the fact that the Bent Arrow lacked title to the upper water hole. If the Bent Arrow would not share it willingly, then perhaps guns—

Banty Morrow's cursing response to that flung the coming trial into the front of Con Allard's thoughts. The days slipped by in a haze of weariness and relentless heat. Then one morning, as dawn burned through the hot night, he awoke to find Banty Morrow beside him, shaking him.

"This is the day," Banty Morrow said. "Hang tough, kid, an' keep your mouth shut. The Bent Arrow goes to hell or it don't, dependin' on you."

They rode in with the whole crew, except for the men they left at the water holes. Gaunt with weariness, unshaven, faces grim and mercilessly burned, they rode into Elktown, swung down and stalked, close-knit, into the courthouse.

Hard men, cattlemen, all of them had a single purpose—all of them but Con Allard. . . .

IT was late afternoon when the jury went out with its instructions.

The courtroom was a stifling sweatbox, with bars of sunlight flooding through the grimy western windows like molten wedges driven into the crowd. Though it was torture to stay in that room, only the twelve men of the jury had left it.

It seemed to Con Allard, crowded up front on the first row of benches, that he had stood all he could, that something within him was going to burst.

In this courtroom was concentrated the fury and anguish and hatred of more than a hundred human beings. All of it centered on him.

Con Allard's hands, white-knuckled, gripped the edge of the seat. In his mouth was the taste of blood from the lip his teeth had cut. He had to hold the seat hard to keep from shaking.

Banty Morrow turned his head to mutter something. Allard could hear the whispering intake of his breath. Morrow's face had a feverish death's-head look; his eyes were burning and the muscles of his cheeks were taut.

"Keep your chin up, son. This can only come out one way."

Con Allard shook his head with desperate helplessness. It wasn't fear that tormented him. It was a thing that Banty Morrow, with his rigid absorption in the Bent Arrow, wouldn't understand. A cattleman jury was going to clear him of guilt—but to do that they had to damn the nester, Saunders.

Con Allard had had to sit, sweating, while Les Beddow took the witness stand and drawled his story about Saunders' rustling. Perjured evidence had woven a net about the man. The girl, Lou Saunders, had jumped to her feet and angrily called the lie. The judge had rapped for order, and a man beside the girl, his face grim, had drawn her down.

They had gone on blackening Saunders' name. He was a trouble-making hardcase, quick with his gun. More than once the Bent Arrow had traced butchered cattle to him. The case was built up ruthlessly, lie upon lie, to save Con Allard from a hang-rope or a prison term.

And all the while Con Allard was remembering Saunders' dogged face, his sweat-stained underwear, the way he had groped for the side of the cabin and not found it. He was remembering the paths worked by the tears across the older woman's rough cheeks.

It was deadly, sickening injustice, and Con Allard was gagging on it. But it had to go down if the Bent Arrow were to survive. The shadow of the trial's bigger import hung over the crowded courtroom —a palpable shadow of violence and death.

The fate of other nesters hung in the balance. The die would be cast, one way or the other. There were other families like Saunders and his wife and daughter —women with weathered faces and work-roughened hands, in home-made clothes; big, awkward men, as dogged and determined as Saunders. They were in the courtroom now, leaning forward, gripped by tenseness and silence, their eyes fixed as if they were staring into a wind storm.

Freedom for Con Allard meant misery and hardship and death for them. He knew that, and the weight of their presence was in the room, bearing down on him, smothering him.

BANTY MORROW leaned against him. "When this is finished," he said, "be all set to move—an' keep close to the boys."

Con Allard's grip on the seat tightened. If the verdict went wrong, the nesters weren't going to accept it without a fight. He looked along that first bench. Les Beddow was there, and Blacky Jeddling and Carver and Red. They were here on his account, when they should have been out trying to keep Bent Arrow cattle alive.

Someone in the corner whispered, "Here they come." The whisper went like spreading fire over the room.

Con Allard pushed with his hands to stand up. He didn't know what he was going to do. But he couldn't sit there—not and remember the look on Saunders' face as he had fallen. He owed Saunders a lot for having taken his life. More, he reckoned, than he owed Banty Morrow, even though Banty was saving him from prison or the gallows.

Banty Morrow's scarred hand was on his shoulder, holding him down. Banty knew something was wrong, though he didn't know what it was. Banty was whispering fiercely to him.

The twelve men—cattlemen—were filing out of the jury room, settling into the chairs that were their jury box. A hum had lifted in the room, like the sound of bees swarming.

The sound of the judge's gavel was like the rapping of doom.

Con Allard croaked, "Let me go, Banty. I—I got to."

Banty Morrow's hand remained, an iron clamp, on his shoulder. There was a blur of words, and then into a white-hot silence fell the sentence: "We find the defendant not guilty!"

Men jumped to their feet, yelling. That first burst of approval, though, didn't drown out an undertone, sullen and threatening, that grew steadily.

Allard wrenched out of Morrow's grip, lunged upright. The room was seething confusion. Somewhere a bench went over with a crash. A man's vicious cursing lifted out of the melee.

Jostled and crowded, Allard fought to get out of the press into the clear. He heard his own voice shouting hoarsely, "That's wrong! I'm guilty. Guilty as hell!"

He had a swift glimpse of the girl, Lou Saunders, her wide eyes wet with tears of anger and bitter disappointment.

Maybe he was heard; more likely not. It couldn't have made any difference at the moment, for the courtroom was a madhouse. Morrow and the burly Les Beddow caught him by the arms and wrestled him toward the aisle. Allard fought, but there were two more Bent Arrow men behind him and another in front. They charged into the aisle.

That sullen undertone had stormed into a howl. Someone was bellowing, "There ain't no law but gun law! Get a rope on that murderin' son!"

Nesters were fighting to get past cattlemen who, by pre-arrangement, were doing their best to block the end seats. A fist like an anvil bludgeoned out of nowhere and caught Allard on the side of the head. The blow knocked his senses reeling and he quit struggling. Banty Morrow whirled and smashed with his gun barrel.

They were half dragging, half shoving Allard along. He saw a splintered section of bench glance off Les Beddow's shoulder. Then, out of a furious jam, they spouted into the blistering street.

A gun slammed out sharp sound. Two or three more picked it up. Horses and rigs at the rail were in a tangle. Allard was aware of being boosted up into a saddle. He clutched at the horn and hung on to avoid being thrown and trampled. The Bent Arrow outfit milled in the spurting dust, guns out, then swung away at a gallop out of Elktown.

CHAPTER THREE

Range Pariah

CON ALLARD'S head was slapping sharp pain through his whole body. He clung to the saddle horn with both hands. Hot dust swirled up to sting his nostrils. The battering of hoofs swelled around him like the mountain-muffled thunder of guns. It was hard to rally his lagging senses, but he did.

There was something he had meant to do, something he was going to do. The broken line of the mountains was looming up ahead. Behind him a trough in the sweltering prairie had swallowed the town. Con Allard pulled in his horse.

In front of him Carver and Red and Blacky Jeddling and Beddow looked over their shoulders. Banty Morrow waved them on, yelled, "Get on out to the herd!"

Morrow dropped back and laid a gloved hand on the bridle of Allard's buckskin. He waited like that, with the perspiration-caked dust like a mask over his wrinkled, rock-like face.

Con Allard said huskily, "Banty, I got to go back. I got to square that killin'."

"That's done," said Morrow levelly. "That's over with."

"Not for the rest of them poor devils, it ain't. On account of me—"

"Forget it, kid." There was a look in Morrow's coal-black eyes that Allard didn't quite get. "You been eatin' Bent Arrow grub a long time. You ain't a nester."

"It don't matter." Allard's voice was shaking. "I'm goin' back, I tell you! You don't know what it's like, killin' a man, murderin' him—when he had all the right of it."

Banty Morrow was rigid in the saddle, black eyes burning. "Maybe I do," he said. "This ain't the first time there's been a fight for the Bent Arrow. You'll forget it. Come along."

Buried in those words was a meaning that Con Allard missed. He felt it and groped for it, but too much was whirling in his brain.

He blurted with stubborn bitterness, "I wish to God I could forget! I can't an' I'm goin' to square it—no matter what!"

Banty Morrow's right hand flowed with sure deftness, and a sixgun was leveled across his pommel, trained on Con Allard's belly. "Not now, you ain't, kid." He jerked his head toward the sun-beaten hills. "There's Bent Arrow cows dyin' up there. I need you." His eyes held grim fire. "I don't give a damn what you think. Cows are in your blood because I put 'em there. When that job's done, we can pow-wow this again."

"It'll be too late," Allard flung at him.

"Sure. . . . The Bent Arrow spent a lot to clear you, kid. If you ride back there now, shootin' off your face, all that goes down the river. So you don't go back."

CON ALLARD was staring at the unwavering muzzle of the Colt's. "Banty—hell, Banty—you wouldn't—"

Banty Morrow's face was tight with a queer hurt and with strain. "I've done worse to keep the Bent Arrow from goin' to the wall. You comin', kid?"

That swift and savage moment gave Con Allard a glimpse into a man's soul—a soul tortured by experiences that were past, but gripped inexorably by a stony determination.

Cattle and the Bent Arrow were Banty Morrow's life. He had only one code: what was good for his cattle was right—what harmed them was wrong. It was a strange and ruthless sort of unselfishness, just as it was a blunt and deadly kind of honesty.

Now, in this slender, dangerous moment, Banty Morrow could whip himself on to shoot if he had to. . . . That understanding flicked across Con Allard's mind.

But, at the same time, old memories were pulling into focus, sharpened by the look in Banty Morrow's eyes. Those memories, like bits of a dream, fell into a picture.

He leaned forward, the color whipped out of his cheeks. "That fire that burned my father out," he demanded fiercely. "How'd it start?"

Banty Morrow, staring at him, made no reply.

There it was, growing out of Con Allard's past, taking shape from formless recollections. He remembered the little bunch of cattle he had herded while his father dragged logs from the higher timbered hills for the cabin.

"We were nesters," he whispered, "dad an' me—on Bent Arrow range." Anger surged up hotly in him. "I always figured that fire was an accident. I reckon I was wrong!"

Banty Morrow cried hoarsely, "Listen, kid! I didn't know—"

"It was you set it!" Con Allard blurted out. "That's how you happened to be there where you could drag me out!"

Denial struggled into Morrow's dark and burning eyes. He saw the futility of it and gave it no voice. In that moment he showed the years his hardness and determination had triumphed over. He was an old man, cruelly single-purposed, hard hit by the lengths to which his character had led him.

"I didn't mean to have it happen the way it did," he said huskily. "I've done what I could to make it right. When I die you'll get the Bent Arrow."

"To hell with the Bent Arrow!"

It was the one thing, perhaps, Con Allard shouldn't have said. Banty Morrow's grizzled head jerked up. "No," he said. "Nobody'll send the Bent Arrow to hell while I'm alive. Not you or anybody else."

Edged bitterness was in Con Allard's voice. "It's a murder outfit. Murder built it. Better tally me now, while you've got the chance."

Banty Morrow looked down at the gun and said softly, "The score's clean between us. I squared it today."

"You did that to save the Bent Arrow. Not me."

For a long time Banty Morrow stared at him. Then a laugh, short and harsh, broke out of his throat. "I won't give your life to you again. I'll loan it to you. I'll collect the next time you come within gun range of the Bent Arrow—if your nester friends don't beat me to it!"

He thrust the gun back into leather, pulled his horse around. Holding the fidgety mount tight, he looked over his shoulder, and in his black eyes was a queer mixture of emotion.

"Kid," he said, "if I was you I'd run like hell out of this country."

His spurs slashed cruelly. The pony lengthened out in a hard dash for the hills.

CON ALLARD watched him go, moved grimly by the thought that a section of his life was being terminated, chopped off short, ripped out by the roots. He was a nester. He always had been one.

There was a certain harsh satisfaction in the knowledge that he was picking up the thread which had been snapped eleven years before. Picking up what death had snatched from Jared Allard.

He stared up toward the hills which held cupped the black ashes of the cabin, little memories seeping back to him. The cabin and the handful of cattle, the richly grassed hills, slopes and—

The possible import of it hit him suddenly and hard. He began to swear softly as he stared at the hills which dusk was now blanketing. Hell, if Jared Allard, his father, had won title to that homestead before he died—

For long minutes he waited there, the warm dark bringing out sweat all over him. Then with an easy pressure of the rein he turned the buckskin back toward Elktown.

Of the danger involved he was only indifferently aware. Too many other things were brewing in his mind. He rode without caution until the lights of the place lifted out of the prairie, then he swung around to the west and slipped through dark outer buildings into a lightless alley. He left the buckskin there, went ahead on foot.

Over the town still hung an impression of the turmoil which had wrenched it apart that afternoon. It lay in the black, breathless air and in the shadows clinging to the dark lumps of buildings. Con Allard felt it and shivered.

He loosened his sixgun in its holster. He had left belt and gun with his horse during the trial.

He had gone as far as he could in the alley. There was nothing for it but to use the space between two buildings and risk the lights of the main street. The chance of anyone being in the Federal Land Office at this hour was scant, but he had to find out. He pulled his hat low, dropped chin into neckerchief and stepped out of the shadows onto the walk.

He saw at once that there was a light in the Land Office window. He walked deliberately toward it, his eyes busy with the street and the people on it. There weren't many, and none directly in his path. Warning tugged at him, but he shook it off.

Fairly certain that he had gone unrecognized, he turned in at the door of the Land Office, pressed the latch above the handle. It was locked. Through the glass panel he could see a clerk busy with papers at one of the desks. The clerk looked up as the latch rattled, and shook his head irritably.

He stopped shaking his head when he saw the gun, trained through the glass on his belly. He got up, his mouth gaping, came stumbling over and slid back the door's bolt. . . .

FIFTEEN minutes later Con Allard straightened above the clerk's desk, a hard grin on his lips. Earlier this night, looking into the muzzle of Banty Morrow's gun, he had taken cards in a tough game—worthless cards. Now he had drawn one more, and had filled his hand.

It was a hand he could win on. He could win for Jared Allard, and for John Saunders, who was dead, and for the men and women in the courtroom who had watched him and cursed him.

The clerk murmured wonderingly, "Cripes, if Banty Morrow had only taken the trouble to—"

"He didn't. He was too damned sure of himself."

The clerk's gaze slid past Allard's shoulder, and alarm jumped into his eyes.

Allard turned deliberately. A face was framed in the glass panel of the door. Allard recognized the man who had sat next to Lou Saunders during the trial, and he nodded with relief. The sooner he could make contact with the homesteaders now, the better. He remembered the man's name was Len Royce.

The face vanished as Allard went toward the door. When he got out onto the walk Royce had backed off a dozen paces and his fist was on his gun.

Allard called, "Take it easy, Royce. I'm not lookin' for a fight."

He saw Royce's mouth open and heard him yell, "It's Allard! Here's Con Allard!"

Figures moving farther up the street stopped and turned. Boots began to pound on worn boards.

Allard snapped, "Damn it, man, listen to me!"

Royce was still backing, as if he were afraid Allard would reach out and throttle him. He kept croaking in a high-pitched voice, "It's Allard! He can't get away. He can't get away."

Con Allard stopped, tightening all over, anger and a sharp knowledge of his danger springing through him. The street had been almost deserted, but now it was filling fast.

Someone bellowed, "Gun the son! Get him!"

In another moment or two he would be in a trap there would be no getting out of. Allard jerked his head to look behind him. Men were coming from that

direction, too. He got the glint of window light on gun metal.

With no warning, the snarling report of a shot slammed along the street, and Allard felt pain rip along his arm. He saw the revolver in Royce's hand, and the smoke still bellying outward. Royce was stumbling backward again, afraid of a return shot.

Con Allard cursed, but didn't draw. A gun fight now would damn him past any redemption. Royce's gun roared again, but he had backed away too far and he missed.

ALLARD spun around, swift decision in the action. He darted for the first opening which would get him off the street, spending an oath on his own short-sightedness. He had counted on hostility, but not this kind of swift and murderous rage. They were out to kill him.

Yells of advice and warning echoed along the street. They were closing in. By a score of feet Con Allard beat the pack to a black gap, plunged into and along it. Gun sound rolled out, and lead bit into the corner as he turned it.

He ran blindly, tripped and got to his feet and ran again. He charged into the alley, began to sprint along it. The one chance left to him lay in getting to his horse. Three strides and he saw that was no good. Nesters had cut through above and below him.

He stopped, holding to the darker shadows. Through him bit the sharp awareness that all of his hopes could end here with a brutal mob killing in a back alley. And he had earned just that!

Caution slowed the figures blocking the alley both ways. But they were coming, calling to each other as they combed and narrowed the open space. Con Allard's hand sank to his gun, left it again. There was still a narrow hope. If he could get across the alley—

Low-bent, he darted out of the shadows. Excited voices bawled hoarse warning. Spots of gun-flame flashed in the darkness. More than halfway across, unhit, he figured he was going to make it.

Then something exploded at the side of his head, just above his ear. In his brain flashed the relieved thought: "A close one, by God!"

Then his mouth, his nose, were full of dirt and gravel. The hard ground was under him; he got the bewildering feel of it with his hands and chest. "Knocked down," he thought. But he could still think. He had to get up, keep on running. He groped and scrambled with his hands, which were like leaden weights. He struggled bitterly to get his knees up and under him.

As clearly as if the man had knelt to murmur in his ear he heard someone snarl, "He ain't done for yet. Kick the heart out of the murderin' son!"

A blow smashed into his side. Queerly, it hurt and the bullet hadn't. It knocked him over on his side and he pulled his knees up for protection. Above him he could see the ring of heads and shoulders looming hugely against the night sky. The urge to fight seized him, but he could make no move.

A boot hit him again and Con Allard felt his senses slipping away from him. Dimly he heard a man growl in disgust, "Finish this quick, damn it!"

Sharply on the heels of those words came two brisk shots. At a little distance a familiar voice was roaring savage orders. It registered only faintly on his mind; waiting for the blow or the shot that would finish him, he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shotgun Reception

CON ALLARD was sprawled in a chair, his head lolling over one shoulder, when he opened his eyes. Standing

in front of him was Sheriff Ben Lake, stolid and square-faced. Lake had a bottle of whiskey in a hand like a bear's paw. He poured some out into a tumbler and held it to Con Allard's lips.

"What kind of a damn fool are you?" he demanded, without rancor. "Haven't you got sense enough to stay out of this town till it cools off?"

The whiskey did Con Allard a lot of good. Though his head was aching as if his skull had been split in two, he used the arms of the chair for support and stood up. There was swift pain in his arm and a beating ache in his side. The walls of the sheriff's office swam around and around. He concentrated on them and tried to make them steady.

"You've got a skull like a beef steer," Lake said, "or you wouldn't be here. I'd have toted you right on over an' dumped you in a coffin. There's a cot out back you can—"

"I've got some ridin' to do first."

Ben Lake shrugged. "You'll be dead meat, son, if those lads hook up with you again."

He held out the whiskey bottle and spilled more into the tumbler. Con Allard drank it, and the fire in his throat made him forget his head. He tried to walk, and found that he could, though pain kept jumping up and hitting him. That drink had taken some of the dizziness out of him; his eyes were focussing better.

Better get something on his arm and head, he decided. Just scratches, maybe, but they might turn ugly. He asked for iodine and some bandage, and the sheriff brought them.

While he worked methodically over the gashes, Con Allard said brusquely, "I owe you plenty, Ben. They aimed to finish me."

Lake said, "Sure. That's my job. I heard the shootin' an' went out for a look-see. A law badge means somethin' to them nesters, even if it don't to Banty Morrow." He finished knotting the strip of cloth around Allard's arm. "I still say you're loco to ride, but if you got to, I'll see you get out of town."

"Get me a start," Con Allard said grimly. "Nothin' this side of hell can touch that buckskin."

The street was wholly deserted when they went out into it. Walking was tough business, but Con Allard shook off the arm Ben Lake offered him. They tramped down the alley together. Allard clawed his way into the saddle, stuck there with his teeth locked together.

He held the buckskin to a walk and Sheriff Ben Lake plodded along silently beside him as they threaded through the last of the outlying buildings and reached the open prairie.

There Lake stopped and rested one of his big hands on Allard's knee. "Tell Banty somethin' for me when you get out there, son."

Con Allard didn't say anything, and Lake continued unhurriedly, "Tell him I'm not blind an' that I'm runnin' the law. Three gents hit town last night an' headed out towards the Bent Arrow. Gunhawks. Tell Banty to send 'em back where they come from. If he tries to make a war out of this, he'll run into plenty of grief from me."

That was all Sheriff Ben Lake had to say. He turned away and began to walk with his steady, plodding gait back toward Elktown. The darkness folded around him and he vanished in it.

THE buckskin began to amble northward without haste, and Con Allard let him drift. The fresh air, in spite of its sticky heat, had a reviving effect. As the throbbing of his head diminished, anger began to pick up momentum in his thoughts.

It wasn't so much the fact that Banty Morrow was shipping in gun-handlers for the Bent Arrow. That wasn't exactly a

surprise. Banty Morrow was a veteran of more than one cattle war. He would fight ruthlessly for the right, as he saw it, with every means at his command.

Allard began to swear between his teeth. The homesteaders of the Elktown country had tried to murder him, without giving him a chance to talk, to explain that he was one of them. Cutting their own throats, by God, as well as his! Though they couldn't have been expected to know that.

He swept away that excuse, remembering Sheriff Ben Lake's words: "You'll be dead meat, son, if those lads hook up with you again."

The wrath in him built up to reckless fury. He was a kid, half sick with weariness, hurt by gunfire and a beating, but his fury pounded new strength into his muscles. He couldn't win without the nesters; and they were lost without him. The union had to be forged if he had to ram his gun barrel down their gullets to forge it!

So reasoned Con Allard, tired and bullet-cut, lashed by his half-delirious ferocity, grasping with a kid's desperation for the hopes and future of his life.

He had had nothing definite in mind when he told Ben Lake he must ride. He had wanted to get out of there, to prove to himself that he wasn't whipped. Purpose formed now. He must start again at the beginning, and the beginning was Saunders—and the girl. Through her a link might be manufactured!

Through the night, the faint beat of hoofs came to Con Allard. He pulled in the buckskin, sat rigid, listening, a hand on the butt of his gun.

Shrouded by the darkness, horses were moving off to his left. He even fancied he could hear murmuring voices. That would be Royce and the others, probably, looking for him. They believed he would head for the Bent Arrow, and it was likely that they had posted guards to cut him off in that direction. They would scout each gully, criss-cross this country and back-track till they found him.

Con Allard reflected grimly that the story would be different this time, if they found him.

He waited until the hoof sounds had died away, then turned the buckskin toward the dry creek and the cabin there in the willows.

How far off dawn might be Con Allard had no way of knowing. It seemed to him that half a lifetime had been packed into the swiftly flowing hours since he had walked into the Elktown courtroom on the morning previous. He had been caught up in the hammering rush of events. Now, with their impetus battering him along, he was shaping events to follow. He couldn't have quit if he had wanted to.

He rode doggedly, but at a slow pace because of his wounds. Once again he heard, or thought he heard, the sound of questing hoofs. They would track him down, surely, and when they did he had to be ready for them. He kept telling himself that, as an armor against weariness and weakness.

The breathless heat of the night was like a drug, and he fought it. So intent was he on that, that he almost overrode the cabin. The buckskin nickered and Allard, thinking instantly of Royce, reined in.

Then he made out the dark shape of the cabin and the stamping of the pony in the corral behind it.

THE breath began to work in gusts in and out of Allard's lungs. He stepped out of the saddle and dropped the buckskin's reins and stood for a moment to steady himself.

Dizziness hit him all at once, like a blow between the eyes. The cabin reeled, and a great rushing noise seemed to swoop at him out of the darkness. Con

Allard fought desperately against it. He got to the cabin door and beat on it with his fist. Locking his teeth together seemed to help. It enabled him to keep a slender grip on his senses. But they were slipping, slipping. . . .

He went on pounding at the door. A light winked on within, and a voice—Lou Saunders'—asked, "Who is it?"

Con Allard blurted his name thickly. Damn the cabin! It was swinging, diving away from him. He clutched at one of the door posts.

Then there was a rectangle of light where the door had been. The girl, barefooted, with a dress pulled hastily about her, was standing in it. In her hands was a shotgun, both barrels cocked and pointing at him.

"If you make one move," she said, "I'll kill you."

Allard could see her only through a haze, but he couldn't miss the look of terror that swept into her eyes, and a corner of his mind that was still sane gave him the reason. He probably looked like a demon from hell—blood from his bandaged head caked on the side of his face; his eyes raw, blazing pits!

"I got to tell you!" he cried desperately. "I got to explain—"

She shook her head, too struck, apparently, by the spectacle he presented to find words. She gripped the long-barreled weapon tightly with one hand, reaching with the other to close the door.

"Wait!" he cried. "You got—to listen!"

She shook her head again and gasped, "There's nothing—"

It may have seemed to her that Con Allard was lunging at her through the doorway. He was, actually, falling across the threshold, sprawling across it.

The shotgun exploded with a bellow of sound that deafened him. Con Allard was falling into the teeth of that deadly charge of buckshot, and he remembered striking at the barrel, blindly, and hitting it with his forearm. Burning powder stung his cheek and neck.

Lou Saunders stumbled back until the square table stopped her. Con Allard could only support himself on his hands and knees, glaring at her from bloodshot eyes.

"You've got another load in that gun," he croaked. "Why the hell don't you use it?"

Her fingers about the shotgun's stock were white. She said in a strained voice, "You—you're hurt."

That reckless fury built up in him again. "Not dead, though!" he cried.

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"Banty Morrow wants me dead. So does Royce an' his gang. You can do 'em all a favor."

THE girl was recovering some of her poise. She was taller than Allard remembered; the amazement and concern and fear were being replaced in her dark eyes by anger.

"Banty Morrow?" she demanded scornfully. "You mean he sent you to kill someone else, and—"

The bandage about Allard's head had worked loose and it was beginning to bleed afresh. The blood dripped down into a little pool by his outspread hand. Sight of it swept away the girl's half-formed thought that this was a trick and that he was shamming.

"How did it happen?" she asked quickly.

"Royce and some of the others caught me in town," he told her.

Engulfing weariness took the place of his anger. It was no longer possible for him to hold up his head. It sagged down and he closed his eyes, but he went on talking, thickly and slowly.

"I wanted to pay back for killin' John Saunders, if I could. They wouldn't listen to me. So I figured the one person I could go to was you. You saw it all happen. You know I didn't pull my gun till Saunders had pulled his. It was an accident, that shot—the kind you'd die to take back, if it would do any good."

The girl exclaimed defiantly, "It was our land!"

He waited wearily, summoning his breath. "Yes. They lied to me at the Bent Arrow. An' I didn't know I was a nester, same as Saunders."

"You're not!"

"I can prove it," he asserted huskily, "if they'll give me a chance. My dad, Jared Allard, homesteaded a piece of Bent Arrow range thirteen years ago. Banty Morrow burned him out, an' dad died in the fire. I didn't find out till yesterday, after the trial. That's the part you've got to believe. If you do believe it, we can lick the Bent Arrow between us; if you don't, we'll all go to hell together."

He brought his head up and stared at her fiercely. "Well?" he flung at her. "Do I get a chance or don't I?"

Before the girl could answer, the pound of hoofs set up a tremor in the flimsy walls of the cabin. That sound concentrated whatever of strength and purpose there was left in Con Allard. It gave him the energy to gather his knees under him and straighten, swaying. He caught the back of a chair and crouched over it, his gaze flicking from the girl to the door of the cabin's bedroom.

"Your mother," he demanded brusquely. "Is she in there?"

Alarm showed in her eyes. "No. But it was my aunt, not my mother," she said. "She—she wouldn't come back here."

For that instant Con Allard thought of only one thing. "Then John Saunders wasn't your father?"

"I loved him," the girl whispered fiercely, "as much as if he had been."

The hoof sounds swelled. By leaning against the chair, Con Allard figured he should be able to save the margin of energy he'd need to work his gun. He got it out and rested it across the back of the chair. In his bloodshot eyes was a hot glare.

"Do I get that chance?" he repeated. "If I don't, you'd better finish me now. I won't stop you. But I won't let them kill me without a fight."

CHAPTER FIVE

Nester's Move

LOU SAUNDERS had not stirred. She moved now, swiftly, and closed the door. She whirled toward him then, wrathful almost to the point of sobbing, and laid the shotgun on the table. "You

know I can't make myself shoot you now —like this!"

The rhythm of the hoofs outside broke into a slowing clatter. A voice shouted, "There's his pony! Watch it now!"

"Shoot me," said Con Allard grimly, "or back me, one or the other. I don't give a damn which."

He waited, weighing his chances of survival with a callousness that surprised him. He wondered how much of the hot impetuousness had been ridden out of Royce and the other homesteaders.

Royce's voice lifted warily. "Lou? You in there, Lou?"

She looked at Allard in silent appeal, and somehow he managed a grin. Nodding at her, he called, "Come on in, boys. Make it one at a time—an' slow. Start throwin' lead an' you'll run into a load of dynamite."

Lou Saunders pulled the door open and then retreated to Allard's side, so that she could come between him and the door, if necessary.

Len Royce was the first man in. He came treading carefully, his gun out, with others crowding him from behind. He was a big man, with shaven beard showing blue on his jaws and throat; his vaguely colored eyes were myopic and his peering scrutiny gave the impression of calculated study.

Four men pressed circumspectly through the doorway behind him. Two of them Allard knew by sight. Sedgely was a thin, middle-aged homesteader with a reddish beard. Dwyer was as blunt as a bear, slow of thought and action, but impregnably determined in anything he made up his mind to do.

It was Dwyer whom Allard picked instantly as the man likely to be most dangerous or most helpful. No amount of arguing would talk him out of a gun fight if the arguments were unsound. Dwyer planted himself squarely—to receive the first shot if there was to be one.

Royce blurted querulously, "What the hell is this, Lou?"

The girl's back was toward Allard. He saw the slope of one cheek and saw that it was white. "He came here," she said. "He was hurt—"

"He'll be hurt worse," Royce snarled. "Get out of the way, Lou."

Con Allard had to hold the chair with all his strength to stay on his feet, but he said, "Maybe I should have plugged you, Royce, when you asked for it. If you'd had any guts then, you'd have got me."

Royce began a bitter rejoinder. Dwyer stopped him by saying, "He could have killed you. I saw it." He looked at Allard. "Why didn't you?"

"I wanted to talk, not fight."

Royce exclaimed wrathfully, "Who the hell's runnin' this, Dwyer? The law should have hung him. You know that. The law didn't an' we're goin' to. It's open an' shut."

One of the others growled, "We been huntin' him all night. Here he is. What in damnation we waitin' on?"

"Five to one, Allard," said Royce between his teeth. "Do you come along with us or do you get yourself gut-shot right here?"

TENSION began to pile up in the little room, and it was the girl who broke it. She picked up the shotgun, which she had laid on the table, and warned, "Don't touch him, any of you!"

Dwyer said heavily and slowly, "Maybe we will an' maybe we won't. I still don't figure, Allard, why you come back to town. You knew what was waitin' for you."

"I'd split with the Bent Arrow."

Royce swore. "That's a lie," he snapped.

Dwyer's voice was level and unruffled: "Why?"

"Because," Con Allard said, "I reckon

I'm fool enough to be more of a nester than I am a gun-handler."

His legs were shaking; the far wall of the room was growing hazy. He was aware of Royce's peering, hate-filled eyes, of Dwyer's solid, emotionless face, and of Lou Saunders, who had half turned and was staring at him. He would have to talk fast, he thought, or he would cave in before he was through.

"My dad was the first nester in this country," he said hoarsely. "Look it up in the Land Office records. He had the pick of this range—if he could hold it, an' he had the kind of guts it took to try. The hundred an' sixty he filed on, any one of you gents would have picked off if you hadn't been plumb sure it was suicide. It turned out to be suicide for him."

Dwyer shifted his weight. "Which hundred an' sixty?"

Allard said slowly, "The Bent Arrow water hole. The upper one."

Dwyer's glance didn't change. Royce exclaimed contemptuously, "What of it? He wasn't on it only a little more'n a year. He didn't get title to it."

"A year was all he needed! That's what Banty Morrow didn't know an' didn't take the trouble to find out. He'd put in time in the Army, durin' the War, so dad got his deed at the end of that first year. That's what I was doin' in the Land Office tonight—checkin' up—an' payin' off the back taxes."

"Hold on a minute, son." Dwyer didn't even raise his voice. "Morrow could have bought up that land any time by payin' off the back taxes."

Allard nodded. "Yeah. But he didn't. He was so blamed sure nobody else would be damn fool enough to tackle it. An' why wouldn't he be? It's smack in the middle of Bent Arrow range—a man'd run a lead gauntlet gettin' into it an' away from it. Jared Allard was a good man—an' he's dead."

CON ALLARD waited, a feeling of hopelessness taking solid hold of him. The room had grown stiflingly hot; he could hear the sobbing intake of his own breathing. The room, with its table and stove, and the five men ringing him like wolves, shrank away to dwarfish proportions and then came rushing back as if to stampede over him.

The silence was broken suddenly by a ringing clatter. Looking down, Allard saw that the sixgun had slipped from his nerveless fingers and bounced to the floor. He knew that he couldn't stoop after it without falling.

He heard Royce cry, "Now, by God!" and saw him jerk his revolver up. There was a sharp, desperate word from the girl, and a blur as she moved.

One of Dwyer's big hands swung deliberately, clamped on Royce's wrist. "There'll be no shootin' yet awhile," he said, and swung his glance to Allard. "Why tell us all this?"

Con Allard pulled himself back out of his hell of pain and weariness. "Cripes, man, don't you see it? Your cattle are dyin'. You need water. Banty Morrow has hired gunhawks to hold you off. You'll be wiped out, every damned one of you, if you don't move an' move fast!"

Dwyer said slowly, "You meanin', son, that—"

"Shove your beef through to that water hole! You haven't got such a hell of a lot, but it's all you have got. You're whipped if you don't! The law will back us. It's got to. We'll be waterin' our own cattle on our own land!"

Len Royce's voice smashed savagely through the swift hubbub of talk. "You crazy blamed fools! It's a gun-trap he's talkin' us into. He was doin' Banty Morrow's dirty job before. He's doin' it again now!"

Color had come flooding back into Lou Saunders' cheeks. Her voice wasn't steady, but she made it heard: "He—he

didn't mean to kill Uncle John when he came here that day. I—believe that."

Dwyer stood solidly planted, a big man, his will as ruthless and determined as an avalanche. "Trap or not, we got to have water! We'll try it—we got to. But if it smells like a trick when we get there, I'll kill you, Allard, with my bare hands!"

"Count me out of it, then," snarled Royce.

Con Allard struggled to get out the thought that was driving at him. "Nobody in this room gets counted out. If word leaks through to the Bent Arrow we won't get within five miles of that water."

Dwyer nodded. "That's right. We'll all be there. We'll put our cattle through or we'll eat Bent Arrow lead together."

CHAPTER SIX

Bent Arrow Lead

THE late afternoon sun threw a hot glare across the broken hills above the Bent Arrow. Con Allard touched the buckskin with his spurs, quickening his pace to a long lope.

Twelve hours of sleep at the Saunders' cabin, plus a quart of scalding coffee and a meal, had slashed away his weariness. His head still throbbed and his left arm was stiff and sore, but the feel of leather under him again was good.

He had sworn he wasn't going to sleep, but Dwyer's big hands on his shoulders had snapped the foolish fight out of him and put him into the bunk that had been John Saunders'. That was probably when they had taken his gun. He was accustomed to balancing its weight, and the lack of it made him a little uneasy in the saddle.

He was under guard, but that was no more than he had expected. The red-bearded Sedgely rode just far enough from his stirrup to be safely out of reach. Sedgely had been sitting by the bunk, a Colt .45 lying across his knees, when he had awakened.

Con Allard's impatient inspection scoured ahead for tell-tale traces of dust in the windless air. All day long cattle had been moving in little bunches from a score of different points, winding through sheltering coulees, up guarding defiles, close under hill shoulders which offered protection. The nesters had concentrated the drive in the timber of the ridge which shelved down to the water hole.

There was no dust to mark their passing, which meant that all nesters were not fools. The cattle had been drifted cannily over patches of rock or sun-baked sod. There was a better than even chance that their approach had gone unobserved.

Going into the timber, Con Allard edged the buckskin to the right. Growing in him was an emotion he hadn't counted on. This was what he had learned to think of as Bent Arrow range; he had worked his heart out on it, grown up on it. A month ago he would have sworn he would die for it.

Now he was riding to smash it. All at once he was a spindly kid of fourteen or fifteen again, and Banty Morrow was saying with gruff kindliness, "No, kid, look—you do it this way," or "Easy, son. Break him but don't kill him—if he's worth ridin' he's got his own kind of guts, like a man."

Whatever he knew about gun-handling, Banty had taught him. The time he had spent with his own father seemed almost too remote and dim to touch him. And the fury of that talk with Banty after they had left the trial seemed wrong, a colossal mistake.

He felt a little sick, thinking of Banty. Banty had raised him. Banty was only fighting for the right as he saw it. Hell, if he were to meet Banty face to face, it might be hard going through with this.

Sedgely, at his elbow, murmured, "There they are—what's left of 'em." Sedgely's voice shook queerly.

He meant the cattle, herded together in a little park in the timber. It was a good two miles through timber to the water hole, or the bawling of the calves would have been heard.

What was it Banty had said? "Cows are in your blood because I put 'em there!" That was right. There was a knot twisting in Con Allard's throat. He couldn't look at the scene of misery and torture in this basin and feel any other way.

His glance, grimly harsh, ran over it. There were roughly three hundred staggering, scarecrow cows. Half of them were without calves. Swollen tongues lolled; bloodshot eyes roamed with dull hopelessness. Their sullen lowing was a raw, wrenching sound. In the little herd, too, were a hundred-odd ribby steers—hide and bones, beef no market would touch.

DWYER and Len Royce were together. Dwyer looked up and nodded. "Nothin' to wait for," he said. "I've had a man up on the ridge. There's only two gents down at the water. The rest of the outfit's south."

Other homesteaders began to drift up on gaunt ponies. Fifteen of them, Allard counted. They were men he had seen in the courtroom, grim-eyed men who had watched while their fate was shaped by lies, men turned hard and desperate by the fact that their homes and their lives were at stake.

There was a last-ditch quality in their stolid silence. About them was a groping force that hit Con Allard and shook him. John Saunders had been one of them. Jared Allard might have been.

He, Con Allard, was the pivot upon which their future swung. He had a debt to pay, to them and to John Saunders. The breath came out of his lungs in a long burst.

"Start 'em," he said to Dwyer. And then he added hoarsely, "But before they get over the ridge I want to talk to those boys down at the water hole."

Dwyer's voice was gentle. "Talk won't help now."

"Maybe not. We got to try, anyhow."

"It's a gun showdown, son, any way you figure it. Banty Morrow don't do things any other way."

Con Allard shook his head fiercely. "Banty's got to have his chance to sidestep it. That goes as it lays! Maybe he'll see it different. We're two to one against him—an' he don't know the law's backin' us."

It was Royce, surprisingly, who said eagerly, "That's right. But damned if Allard is the man to send. I'll—"

Sitting there in his saddle, Con Allard grew furious with the bickering and with himself. If the tie between him and the Bent Arrow weren't broken, if anything could save it, he must utilize it. No one else. No one else gave a damn whether Banty Morrow lived or died.

He heard Dwyer say, "You'll stay here, Royce."

Con Allard pulled the buckskin around and began to thread toward the ridge. No one said anything or moved to stop him. Behind him he heard voices being raised, the whack of ropes, the shuffling roll of cloven hoofs.

He went on across the ridge, every muscle in his body tight and his throat tight. Down below he could see two riders. Thirsty Bent Arrow cattle were packed up against the fence which barricaded the water hole; they were being run through in bunches, getting enough water to keep them alive, and no more.

One of the men he saw to be Les Beddow. The other was a lean, dark-jawed rider he had never seen before. One of the gunhawks Banty had imported,

he reflected, and was aware that his own holster was empty.

BEDDOW saw him and stared silently at him as he worked his way through the cattle to the fence. Les Beddow was close to fifty, a veteran who had come up the trail from Texas in the early days; he was heavy-set and muscular, with a face like scarred and battered leather. Days and nights without sleep had gouged furrows into his cheeks; his eyes were sunken and burning in his head.

He kept on staring as if Allard were a stranger to him, and Allard jerked out at last: "There's cows dyin' across the ridge, Les. They got to have water."

Beddow spat from between cracked lips. "Nester cows."

"They're dyin'," Allard repeated. "They're comin' here for water."

Beddow's voice was no more than a croak. "I'll pile the whole damned lot of 'em up with .30-30 slugs 'fore they'll get any of this."

"That won't work," said Allard grimly. "There's too many guns buckin' you."

The dark-jawed man was sidling his horse to get Beddow out of line. There was a wary look of appraisal in his eyes; his lips were a tight line. Then all at once he stopped worrying the pony, and his expression turned sullen.

Les Beddow looked up, too, wrathfully. Allard turned his head. Four homesteaders had followed him across the ridge. Two hundred yards back, perched on a shelf, they had dismounted and leveled rifles across their saddles.

Through a notch in the ridge, as the three men below stared upwards, began to pour the ragged nester herd. Flanking it came the riders, stiff and awkward in their saddles, carrying shotguns, rifles, pistols.

There was something terrible in the stony bitterness of Beddow's cursing.

"Two to one odds," Allard said. "Banty can't buck that. An' the law's behind us."

"The law's behind the son that shoots straightest."

"Not this time. Jared Allard got his deed to this hundred an' sixty. It's mine now. Tell Banty that. Tell him to check it if he thinks I'm lyin'."

Beddow exclaimed harshly, "Here's all the deed the Bent Arrow needs." He tapped the butt of his sixgun.

Con Allard leaned across the horn, his tone urgent. "There's water enough to get all of us through this jam. Tell Banty if he gives us a break now, I'll never block this water. It'll be open to the Bent Arrow as long as Banty wants to use it."

"I'll tell him," Beddow croaked, "an' I'll tell you what he'll say: Go to hell!"

Con Allard drew a long breath. "All right, he can take it or leave it. If he don't want it, the Bent Arrow will never touch a drop of this water."

The dark-jawed gun thrower was fidgeting again. "There's too damned many of 'em," he snapped abruptly. "Me, I'm clearin' out."

Les Beddow turned his bitter stare toward the ridge and swore. "We'll be back," he said. "Tell them dog-whelp nester friends of yours to get set to run or die!"

He didn't give Allard another glance. He and the gunman rode to the far gate, opened it and cut a way through with slashing ropes. Bent Arrow cows poured in, to jam the spring before Con Allard could get around to block them. . . .

HEAVY work followed, and the homesteaders went at it doggedly. The enclosure had to be cleared of Bent Arrow cattle, and the nester herd run through. Dusk coated the hills before the job was done.

Sweat had caked dust on Con Allard's face so that it hurt when he moved his jaws; his throat and his nostrils were

clogged with it. His head was throbbing again, while his left arm seemed to be on fire. All that, though, was only an irritating undercurrent in his thoughts.

Dwyer pulled over to him on a laboring horse. He said gently, "I'm sorry it had to be this way, son. You did the best you could." He pulled Con Allard's six-gun from his waistband and held it out.

Allard took it and holstered it. He kept his fingers curled around the grip.

"Banty Morrow should have been here by now," Dwyer suggested. "What's keepin' him?"

"Trouble down below, I reckon. Maybe they busted down the fence or somethin'. He'd stay an' fix that first."

Dwyer's solid face was emotionless in the gathering dark. "He'll come, though, an' come fightin'. That's the only way he knows."

It wasn't the dust that made Con Allard's voice creak. "Yeah. He'll rip up this water hole, foul it, 'fore he'll let us have it. The hell of it is, this thing could be worked out."

"It'll be worked out—with guns—by daylight."

Allard nodded grimly. "We better split up. Half down here an' half up on the ridge to cover 'em. No use wastin' men tryin' to hold our stuff separate."

"You give the orders, son. I'll back 'em."

For an hour Con Allard scouted the ridge, posting his men. The water hole had to be covered, and attack from the rear or the northern flank guarded against. Approach from the south, because of the steep shelving of the ridge, was so difficult that danger from that quarter was negligible.

Slanting along the northern part of the ridge, on the water side, was a deep gully which could offer concealed advance to a half dozen riders. Once won, the gully could sweep the ridge, and command of the ridge meant domination of the water.

The last of his force Allard left on either brink of the gully under Dwyer's direction. He himself drifted back to a niche of rocks which gave him a view of most of the ridge and the plain below.

It was wholly dark by now. The steady lowing of thirsty cattle continued unbroken, a keening more sharp because of its inhuman quality. An hour drifted by, and then another. The close-hanging night sky did nothing to relieve the heat; the stars were like bits of white-hot metal.

A full moon swung presently above the rim of the earth, climbing and throwing a vague, ghostly light over the mingled herds packed at the barricaded water hole, over the long hills and the timbered ridge.

Con Allard squirmed restlessly from one position to another, full of a sharp impatience. He had blockaded his tormenting uncertainty, was holding his mind grimly in the groove of the job ahead.

It broke with no warning. A rifle shot from one of the hills lying to the south and east. It ripped out of the silence, echoed through the night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Blood of a Cowman

THEY came with a rush—a dark mass of flying figures—bunched and running hard for the water hole. They swooped from the protection of a hill shadow, came charging in a ragged formation, the riders like lumps hunched across the ponies' withers. Gun flame jetted in steady bursts.

The intention, apparently, was to smash recklessly through to the cattle, which would shield them, and from there either take or ruin the water.

Guns began to talk down below and along the ridge, though the range was still too great for any kind of effective

shooting; but let it be cut down another five hundred yards, and the Bent Arrow would suffer real damage.

On they came. Allard counted eight mounts, black, skimming shadows. He pulled himself up on his knees, scowling. Over-eager, even the short guns on the ridge were opening up. Something was wrong. On the face of it that charge looked like a piece of hopeless insanity, and Banty Morrow wasn't a fool.

Then Con Allard was on his feet, yelling. "North! North, damn it! Morrow's comin' along the ridge!"

The homesteaders' ragged fusillade slackened. Then somewhere to the north of Allard a man squawked in amazement. A shot answered him. It was the signal for a crash of shooting. Allard had to wrench his glance downward to make sure he was right.

He had been. Two of the eight supposed riders charging the water hole had swung away and were circling out of range. The remaining six horses came on, but the lumps across their withers were roped sacks of dirt and not men.

Banty Morrow had come down along the ridge from the north. The ruse had enabled him to spot the position of every homesteader gun there. There was more than an even chance that he had got close enough to blast the startled defenders out of his path.

Swearing, Allard began to stumble along a rocky ledge. He shouted Dwyer's name, and Dwyer bawled a reassuring answer. Gunfire was flickering all along the upper part of the ridge.

Ineffectual though he knew it to be, Allard threw lead steadily. Even the impression of resistance, at this moment, was valuable. Scrambling along the ledge, he could see the ebb and flow of the fight he was delayed in reaching. Caught off guard, the nester line was wavering. Banty Morrow's thrust along the ridge was deadly and determined.

At least seven men were carrying the Bent Arrow attack. They were punchers who knew guns and their handling. They had got out of the timber before the alarm was given and were coming along through the rocks. The clamor of the shooting made a savage roll of sound that pounded against the hills and thundered back.

Allard saw a homesteader spring to his feet and begin a wild, darting run back along the ridge. A bullet hit him and knocked him down. Dwyer's heavy voice boomed out words that were lost. Somewhere along the nester line a shotgun roared above the sharp crackling of short guns.

The fury of the thing stormed through Con Allard's blood. He was yelling but was deaf to his own voice. Close enough to make his shots count, he knelt and stuffed fresh shells into his gun. Lead bit into rock beside him, ricocheted away, screaming. He pumped bullets at the blooming muzzle flashes with a cold intensity at variance with the flaming battle fire in his veins.

Among that handful of nesters was a stubborn purpose that went deeper than rage. It held them together, held them rooted. That line shouldn't have held, but it did. Inexperienced men who had never before faced gun-death accepted the threat of whining slugs and triggered ancient weapons of their own.

The smashing peak of the fight was past before Con Allard realized it. The firing diminished, broke off into sporadic shooting. The back of that first rush was broken.

CON ALLARD remained where he was, the Colt heavy and hot in his hand. The fever of the fighting passed out of him, and he felt sweat that was icy cold come out on his face and neck. A groan wrenched its way through his throat.

He had been shooting—shooting to kill

—at men he had lived with most of his life. Men he had worked with, men who had cursed him as only friends can, laughed with him, roughed him, and taught him just about all he knew. He had a quick, knifing memory of Les Beddow telling fabulous stories of the cattle trails over a roundup fire, of Blacky Jeddling's buck-toothed grin, of Banty Morrow's wrinkled, intent face with its bar of red mustache.

And it wasn't over yet. The shooting had steadied to an irregular duel. Banty Morrow knew what pounding, relentless gunfire would do to untrained nerves. Staving off a straight rush was one thing; crouching, peering into blackness, waiting for the bullet that might come at any time out of nowhere, was another.

That hour-after-hour waiting plucked at a man's nerves, shredded his courage, chiseled away at his will to fight.

That was the game Banty Morrow was playing now. Another rush would come when the time was ripe, and Banty Morrow was banking he would win on it.

Con Allard began to crawl forward. The homesteaders had to be kept busy as a counter measure. He set them in pairs to checking on and caring for the wounded. One man, he found, was dead; two were seriously hurt. He had those carried down to the foot of the ridge.

He shifted men between the ridge and the water hole, pretending to be dissatisfied with previous positions. All of it was done slowly, under a sniping fire from the section of the ridge held by the Bent Arrow.

Dwyer had a cut along one cheek which had bled badly, but he refused to leave. "It's quit bleedin'. We held 'em, son."

"We'll have to again, an' next time it'll be tougher."

Len Royce crouched by his side in sullen silence. With his eyes grown accustomed to the darkness, Allard could make out Royce's face, screwed up in baleful hatred or fear. He couldn't decide which.

Allard moved on. Down below he could see the dark mass of the herd. Ordinarily it might have been stampeded by the shooting. Now the brutes had no thought for anything but their thirst. They huddled stubbornly against the stockade, milling and lowing.

Allard's eyes turned more and more often toward the east. It seemed to him that daylight was hours overdue. He was possessed by a crazy notion that it would never be light again; he shook it off with an oath. It was the waiting—the watching for a muzzle flash which never came twice in the same place, the wondering if he or someone else would be hit.

It made a man want to stand up and yell. It made him want to go plunging out of range or else storm into the teeth of those hidden guns and get it over with.

Then all at once the patch of sky beyond the hills was no longer black. Faint gray light, skipping the hollows, picked out the hill summits and relieved the denseness along the ridge.

It was then Banty Morrow made his second try.

HOOFS battered against rock. The shooting had stopped completely; no man yelled.

In that instant the rush of hoofbeats was more appalling than the sound of guns had been. It gave the impression of an irresistible wave of power that would sweep all before it.

Con Allard roared, "Hold it! Make 'em count!"

There was a swirl of movement at the upper end of the gully. It resolved itself into horses and men. Two abreast, they came at a smashing run down the ravine. Allard, on the lower rim, jerked up his gun and shot.

Leveled Bent Arrow sixguns broke loose with a fusillade that laced both rims with lead. A slug snatched at Allard's

shoulder; another pitted granite at his elbow.

There was a wild bedlam of shouting now. Nester guns slammed out a ragged reply, but it didn't stop the Bent Arrow's flying phalanx. Allard could pick out the set face of Banty Morrow, Blacky Jeddling's wide mouth drawn back from his lips in a snarl. There were other faces he didn't know.

One of the riders crumpled over his saddle horn, swayed there perilously. A horse stumbled, righted itself. Somewhere on the rim the shotgun bellowed, spraying buckshot along the gully.

The blood was pounding in Con Allard's head. It seemed that the rush must win, and the fury of defeat was in him. He stood up in a half crouch, spilled out three shots as fast as he could shoot.

All at once the flashing movement appeared to slacken. The leading horse went down. The two behind it piled up in a tangle. Riders were turning, fighting rearing broncs. One of the hired gunfighters spurted out of the confusion, went racing back up the gully.

Others surged after him. A riderless horse scrambled to its feet, stood trembling. In the gully remained only the wreckage of that charge.

Then Allard saw Banty Morrow. He had been riding the horse Con Allard's bullet had stopped. He was on his hands and knees in the bottom of the ravine, trying to get up—and not making it. He had been hit in the head, and blood hid half of his wrinkled face. Yet there still was fire in his black eyes as he turned them up toward the gully's rim.

A man's harsh cursing snapped across Allard's awareness. He saw Len Royce across from him, a rifle at his shoulder. The rifle flared. Banty Morrow's body jerked at the impact of the bullet, but he didn't go down.

Through Con Allard's mind flashed the thought that, with Banty Morrow dead, the fight would be ended for once and all. He was helpless, and one more shot from Royce's rifle would do it.

EVEN as he thought that, Allard was moving, whipped on by an emotion he had no time to define. Banty was down there—he couldn't watch Banty being murdered. The tension and strain in him exploded in vivid rage, and he jumped.

Fifteen feet down, agony sprang up from his ankle as he landed sprawling on the gully's floor. His rasping shout made Royce's eyes swerve from their target. A dozen limping steps took him to Banty Morrow, and he lifted his Colt in warning.

The rifle barrel, instead of going down, swung up to cover Allard's chest. He saw it, saw Royce's contorted face behind it.

Allard dropped. At the same instant he fired. Royce's bullet flattened on the rock behind him. Royce held stupidly to the rifle, as if it were a bar which would support him. He fell straight out from the ravine's rim and went limp in mid-air.

Allard didn't see him fall. Banty Morrow had crumpled down on his blood-stained face. Allard turned him gently, lifted his shoulders. Banty's burning, coal-black eyes were open. There seemed to be no relenting in him, even now.

He whispered with damning bitterness, "Why didn't you—let 'em—finish me?"

There was a rattling of loose rock as Dwyer climbed down into the gully. Allard looked at him and at the huddled body of Len Royce.

"Write your own ticket," he said grimly. "I don't give a damn what—"

Dwyer stopped him soberly. "Easy, son. Maybe that way was best. Royce was figurin' to sell us out to the Bent Arrow. That's why I kept him close to me. He'd already made a stab at it—I reckon that was why he wanted to shut Morrow up for keeps."

Banty Morrow's eyes had closed. Al-

lard felt for his heart and found it still beating. "Banty gets to a doc first thing," he snapped. "Talkin' can wait."

"Sure. Sure. Fightin's done. Ben Lake is down at the water hole with a posse, collectin' hardware."

BANTY MORROW'S seamed face looked like a piece of chipped leather against the pillow of the bed in the hotel room. His hands, scarred in that old fire, lay outside the blankets. It was sight of those hands, queerly, that hurt Con Allard the most.

Banty went on talking, his voice a husky whisper. "Seemed like I always wanted to tell you—an' never quite had the guts to. I didn't know Jared Allard was in that cabin. Les Beddow will tell you that."

"That—that's been squared, Banty."

"Do the best you can with the Bent Arrow, kid—nothin' ever meant more to me."

Con Allard blurted, "I can't take the Bent Arrow, Banty. I won't."

"You got to. Me, I'm pullin' out of this country—if the law'll let me."

"I've talked to Lake," Allard said hoarsely. "The fightin's done, an' it's goin' to end with that. But, hell, Banty—"

There was no fire in Banty Morrow's coal-black eyes, yet a certain wistful, harried spirit crept into his voice. "Stand by," he whispered, "an' watch 'em cut the Bent Arrow to pieces? That'd kill me quicker'n anything."

"You'll stick, though," Con Allard exclaimed fiercely. "It'll be different, but it'll be an outfit you can be proud of. Damn it, Banty, the Bent Arrow's home—for both of us."

Banty Morrow waited a long time, and at last said gently, "Yeah, son, I reckon it is."

The doctor came to the door of the room then, and coughed. Banty Morrow was looking at the ceiling, and some of the harsh lines of his face had softened.

Con Allard nodded and went out into the hall. He was surprised to see Lou Saunders standing there against the wall. She looked as if she had been waiting a long time. He couldn't think of anything to say.

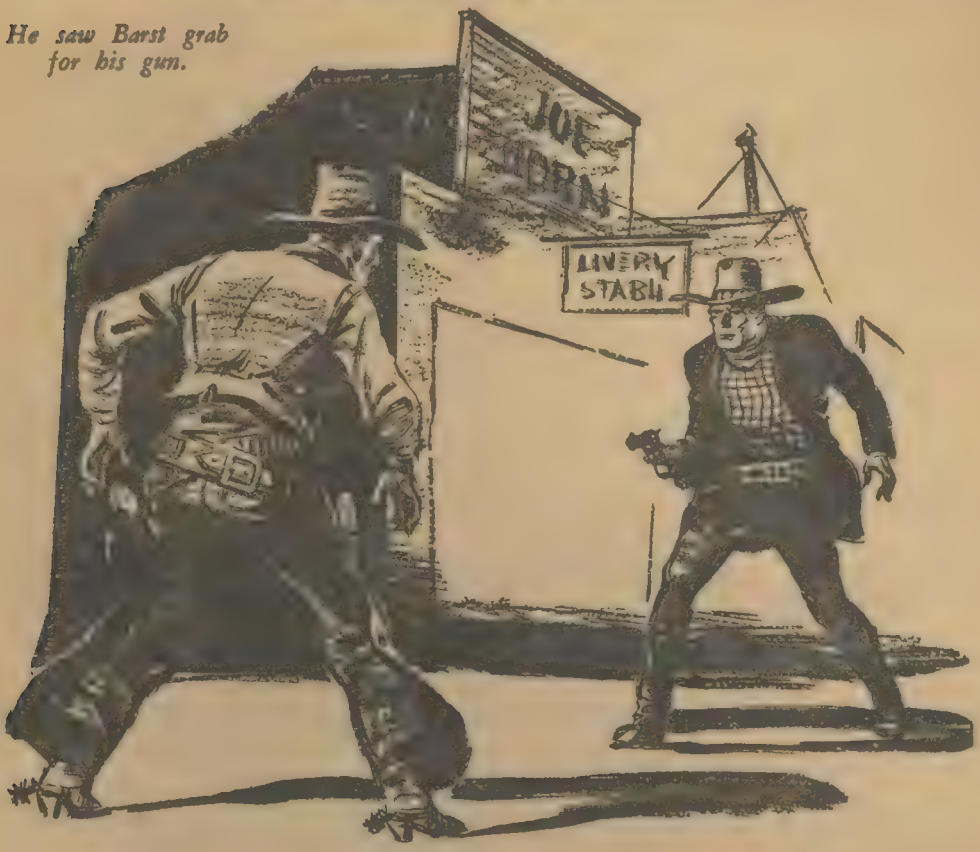
Her voice came to him dimly, saying, "Ben Lake is running the crew out there. He's watering everything—Bent Arrow cattle and ours too."

Con Allard stood there, suddenly struck by something in her eyes. It was more than their alluring depth and duskiness. It was more than the beauty of her face and her dark curling hair.

It told him that before him, for the taking, was something he had wanted as desperately as he had wanted an even break for the Elktown nesters.

THE END

Up against his first gun test, Joel Henderson turned and fled--- from his ranch, his sweetheart, his honor .... But only a bullet, which he would not face, could free him from the Boothill mark that branded his coward's heart!



He saw Barst grab for his gun.

DOC EMMET'S CURE for COWARDS

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

THEY paced toward each other slowly, from opposite ends of that cowtown street, Joel Henderson and huge Sid Barst. Their sombreros were tipped low, eyes narrowed, their right hands crooked just behind holstered guns. Each of them, at this instant, was intent only upon killing the other.

Sid Barst was the older of the two, a great tempestuous cattle baron with bushy black brows, small angry eyes, and abnormally long arms. Before his predatory guns several men already had died.

Outwardly, Joel Henderson appeared equally dangerous, tall, with a lean hard face, solid shoulders and long flat thighs. But he was only twenty-two. He had never before walked into a gun fight. And even into this one he had been forced unwillingly, by the insults and deliberate

public challenge of Sid Barst which, in that day and place, no man could ignore.

The measured tread of their advance toward each other was unhurried. Little gusts of dust spurted from each striking impact of their high-heeled boots.

To either side, false-fronted buildings reared flatly, windows glittering in the hot plains' sunlight like avidly gaping eyes. The wooden sidewalks were deserted. A hush as of impending death gripped the town. Yet from behind those monstrously staring windows, or thinly opened cracks of doors, almost the whole population watched. And their partisanship, in this first minute, went out unanimously to young Joel Henderson, even as it changed suddenly, less than sixty seconds later, to a surprised and withering scorn. For until then, only Joel Henderson himself suspected he was a coward.

Even now, still marching mechanically forward, Joel was only curiously stunned. He was stunned that this thing he had dreaded so long had come to pass, that he should find himself walking deliberately into what he fully believed was certain death. Already he could see a grin of confidence stretching Barst's thick lips. In only seconds now their guns must crash, vomit a bullet-screaming hail of death.

In only seconds! Yet an eternity seemed to be passing. Up from the past came rushing a ghastly memory—himself as a boy, stepping from a frontier store into a sudden, unexpected roar of gunfire. A man staggering backward, arms outflung, collapsing against him. Blood jetting crimson from a bullet-severed artery in the dying man's neck, splashing over his own face.

It had seemed scalding hot, expanded his nostrils with its sickening, sweetish smell. He had been forced to claw it from his eyes before he could see. Then he had found himself running wildly back into the store, retching. Ever since, at the thought of facing a blasting gun, that violent illness had boiled up within him again.

He could feel it now. It ran all through him, swelling hotly in his throat, making his whole body sweat coldly. He was afraid he was going to gag audibly. He felt his crooked right hand commence to quiver.

This way he hadn't even a chance! Barst would fire repeatedly before he could even get his gun out. What a fool he was! He was going to die, simply because of an insult, rather than face the scorn of tongues and the loss of a ranch. What use was a ranch, or even self-respect, to a dead man? Even now he could turn around, deliberately walk away. Even Barst probably wouldn't dare shoot him in the back before witnesses. At least it was a chance—a chance to *live*.

JOEL still marched mechanically forward, and Barst came on. Their boots plopped hollowly in the dust. It was the only sound in a silence as intense as a steady scream. Only seconds now! Yet an eternity. . . .

Don't turn, don't run away. You couldn't do that and still look any other man in the eyes. Or even yourself. Instead you had to die. Stand and take the ripping slugs, let them slash, tear, crash through your vitals. . . .

Again the man in front of that frontier store was collapsing against him, blood spurting into his face from that severed artery. Scalding hot! That sweet sickening smell! It was filling his nostrils, his eyes; swirling into his brain, gurgling, boiling, roaring. He was gagging, dizzy. The whole street suddenly seemed to tremble and sway.

Then it happened, irrevocably. He wasn't even aware of the movement of his body. Rather, it seemed that the town itself circled swiftly around him and he could no longer see the fatefully advancing Barst. What Joel Henderson had done, actually, was to turn completely

about, arms hanging limply, and start walking rapidly away.

He didn't look back. But he sensed that Sid Barst had jerked to a stop, was staring after him in blank surprise. For an instant the shocked silence held. It was as though the whole town was gaping in amazed disbelief. But at least he was still alive, he. . . . Then a gun crashed behind him, like a roar of doom. A bullet struck his left side with the explosive impact of a giant fist.

Even as he fell, he still couldn't believe it had happened. Sid Barst had deliberately and murderously shot him from behind.

Dimly he heard someone shouting. His face was against the ground, dust filling his mouth. He was aware that whoever had shouted had now run off the porch of Peters' Store, was bending over him. Dragging up his head, he saw the lined face and snow-white hair of Doc Emmet, the pale old eyes wise and sad with half a century of frontier doctoring.

Only vaguely he realized that the aged physician had twisted half around, was shouting angrily to Barst, "Put up that gun now! You hear? Likely you've killed the lad anyway, you damn murderer!"

Barst's truculent answer thundered back, a blast of scornful words: "He had his chance to draw, didn't he? But he was scairt! The yellow pole-cat! All right—if he lives, I'm giving him just twenty-four hours to quit the country! After that, I'll shoot him on sight!"

Now the old doctor had dropped to one knee beside Joel, had slipped a supporting arm beneath him. "Easy now, son," he cautioned. "You're bleeding like a stuck pig. Here now, let me help you up. We'll get to my office, where I can plug up that hole."

Somehow, aided by the doctor, he struggled erect. His whole left side was aflame with pain, as though a claw was tearing at his heart. He sagged against Doc Emmet. Yet even then, through all that sickening pain, he felt an enormous mounting disgust for the thing he had done, turning his back on this fight. He had to force his gaze to meet the old physician's. Yet in Doc Emmet's quiet eyes, surprisingly, he saw none of the expected scorn, only understanding and a sort of immense, weary pity.

"Doc," he muttered, "I—don't—reckon I'm even worth saving—"

"Stop that fool talk!" snapped the old doctor. "Save your breath for walking. Go easy now, and I'll get you where I can fix you up. Make you as good as new, like as not."

THE territory was young in those days. Mostly, each cattleman was a law unto himself, controlling his leagues of grazing chiefly by the guns he and his riders wore. A man's claim to land for which he was unwilling to fight was worthless.

Year after year Sid Barst, violent product of that violent age—determined ruthlessly to dominate a whole countryside—had increased his herds, expanded his range. Those opposing him were threatened away, or died in apparently mysterious accidents, or were obliterated in deliberately provoked gun-duels.

Two months ago old Tim Henderson, Joel's father, had been found dead, fallen apparently from his horse, dragged, his head bashed in by the flying hoofs. He had been Sid Barst's most obstinate opponent, a man whom even the truculent Barst hesitated to face in open combat. But Barst's fear of the father did not extend to the son. Upon Tim's death, he had reached at once for the range Joel had inherited.

And already Barst had won. So Joel believed, as he rode slowly homeward across the hotly glittering plain. It was late afternoon. The pain in his bandaged side, a dull throbbing, punctuated occasionally with knifing thrusts, made him

miserable, though Doc Emmet had assured him that the ride home could do him no further harm. Funny how the doc had said that, no *further* harm; come to think of it, you could take that either way you wanted. It could mean that the wound was not serious at all, or else so very serious that nothing could make it any worse. He laughed. He was being a fool again—why, this wound was little more than a painful scratch!

His thoughts returned to Barst. Yes, Barst had won. The ultimatum had been plain enough. Either shoot it out, or quit the country—within twenty-four hours. And he had failed to shoot it out.

It meant more than losing a ranch, forsaking the tradition of an honored father. It meant, too, the loss of Linda Gregg. Surely she would not marry him now, nor could he let her, a man whom she no longer could even respect.

The impulse came rushing upon him to return to town, somehow to face Barst again, to drive himself into that blasting death he was certain he would meet. He wanted to, even tried to, and he couldn't. He believed blankly that again his body would fail him, would crumple and flee, despite all the goading of his will.

JOEL'S five cowhands had all ridden for his father—Long-Horn Gibbs, Bill Dobbs, Texas Johnson, Bronco Fisher, old Beaver Williams. Despite the continued pain in his left side, and a strangely dizzying weakness, Joel forced himself to face them that night, to sit at supper with them as usual in the big lamplit kitchen.

Ordinarily talk ran around the long table, and later the outfit would lounge about, smoking, mending gear or playing seven-up. Tonight it was different. Word had reached them already of what had happened in town. No mention of it was made; but the men were embarrassed, eating hurriedly, speaking only in monosyllables, trying not to look at Joel. Even Wan, the Chinese cook, served the food more silently than usual. When the meal finally ended, all except old Beaver Williams filed out at once, glumly, to the bunkhouse.

Beaver, hesitating for a moment in the doorway, fingered the long-bladed knife he always carried in his belt.

"Joel," he grumbled, "you have only to give me the word."

Joel knew what the old mountain man was offering, to take over the eliminating of Sid Barst. He shook his head. "No, Beaver. I wouldn't be asking anyone to do it for me."

Beaver sighed, stole silently away.

The whole outfit was like that, Joel thought. They would back him; not one of them would criticize him openly. Even with respect gone, that curious loyalty would remain—to a tradition and a name, to the memory of his hard-riding father.

Thinking moodily of his father, Joel pushed back his chair, rolled and lit a cigarette. He had believed Tim's death to be the accident it appeared. Only now did he really question it, ask himself if Doc Emmet had not seemed queerly evasive after examining the body, if the old physician might not have discovered some strange contradiction which he had felt would be better left unmentioned. Joel told himself he was imagining things again; so completely had he lost confidence in himself this day that he couldn't even trust his own thoughts.

Wan had finished washing the dishes. He paused in the doorway of the small back room where he slept, looked unhappily at Joel, and exclaimed suddenly in his nasal sing-song: "Tomorrow I bakee you fine pie! You likee!"

Then he ducked his head, scuttled out of sight. That was Wan, embarrassedly expressing his own kind of loyalty, his way of saying that he too would back his boss.

Joel stood up, walked to a window. He gazed out across those lonely leagues of moonlit plains. Somewhere, far away, a coyote howled. He put one hand against the wall, supporting himself. His side throbbed painfully. He supposed he should be in bed—no, there was one more thing he had to do. He turned suddenly, put on his sombrero, and walked outside.

At the corrals he caught up and saddled a horse, forced himself to ride the three miles to the Gregg ranch.

JOHN GREGG, twisted with rheumatism, had sold off his cattle a year past, but still lived on in the old house with his only child, Linda. She opened the door now, as Joel eased stiffly off his horse beneath the hotly rustling cottonwoods. He saw her against the living room lamplight, tall, lovely, tawny of hair. By now she would know what had happened in town today. Stepping out on the porch, she closed the door behind her, and he knew she was trying to save him from facing her father.

He walked up on the porch. "Well, Linda," he said, "I—"

She put one hand quickly on his arm, broke in gently. "Wait now, Joel. Let's talk about it quietly. I only just heard what—what happened, that you were wounded. Should you be out like this so soon? I mean, isn't it dangerous?"

"It's nothing," Joel said. "Only a scratch."

"You're sure?"

"Well, Doc said it was all right for me to ride home." They sat on the edge of the low porch. He put his big hands on his knees, stared at the ground. "Linda," he said, "I've only come to say goodbye. Not to make excuses. I haven't any."

"You mean—you're going away?"

"You say you've heard what happened. I had to either shoot it out with Barst, or quit the country. And—well, I didn't shoot it out."

"Yes—I know." She looked up hesitantly. "Well—can't you make a fresh start somewhere else? I could wait until you sent for me."

"Linda," he said, "I'm releasing you from any promises you've made me."

"I haven't asked you to."

"No, and you wouldn't," he admitted. "That's why I'm saying it myself."

She gazed at him curiously. Her woman's heart somehow seemed to have sensed the ordeal he had endured this day; but, also, she had been brought up to rate courage, and strength, as man's most essential qualities. She seemed confused, bewildered, no longer certain what to believe.

She said finally, slowly, "Joel, for a long time I've been afraid you would clash with Sid Barst and be killed. No woman wants the man she loves to chance being killed. Tonight—I'm just grateful you're still alive."

"Linda," he told her, "I'm not what you thought I was. You know that now, and so do I. Whether you wanted to or not, you could never quite forget what I did today."

Her honesty kept her from flatly denying it. She said simply, "As long as I still want to marry you, I can't see that anything else matters. I don't think you could help what happened this afternoon. If you had been sick or had a leg cut off, Joel, I might pity you, even feel you were no longer capable of doing just the things I had once expected of you, but that still couldn't stop me from caring for you. I wouldn't have much respect for myself if I refused to marry you just because you had been sick or hurt. And I can't see that what happened today is—well—any different."

There it was again, that loyalty—and *pity*. He came stiffly to his feet. Her scorn would have cut less deep.

"No, Linda," he said, "I can't let you do it. This is goodbye."

He walked to his horse, climbed painfully into the saddle. He rode off, into the vast aching loneliness of that far-flung wilderness night.

HE rode homeward slowly. Every hour since he had refused to fight Barst had become increasingly bitter: the scorn which he had felt for himself, the way the outfit had regarded him tonight, this betrayal of the memory of his dauntless father, the loss of the ranch, of Linda. . . . He knew now that a single act could shape all the years to come, that this day must shadow his whole future life, wherever he went, among men or alone. The memory of it would be inside him, inescapable. In avoiding death he had destroyed, with strange irony, all that should make life worth living.

He felt light-headed, strangely giddy. That was only because he had lost a lot of blood, he told himself. Yet it startled him a little the way his breath stopped each time that stabbing pain caught him in the side, the way his heart seemed to flutter and hesitate. . . .

As he rode into his ranchyard, half an hour later, he saw Doc Emmet's horse and rig at the hitchrack. The doc had said his wound wouldn't need to be dressed again until morning. What then did he want way out here this time of night? Puzzled, Joel unsaddled, turned his mount into a corral, and walked up to the house. He went into the lamplit kitchen.

Doc Emmet had found a pack of cards, was sitting at the table playing solitaire. His head was bent, his hair silvery in the lamplight. He laid out a card, spoke without looking up.

"Hello, Joel. I been out on a call, thought I'd look in on you. Want to talk to you."

Joel sank into a chair, stretched out his long legs. "What ails me," he said bitterly, "no doctor can cure. What I mean, Doc, I walked out on that fight; I didn't stand and face him."

Doc Emmet played another card. "Well, there's more ways to cure a body," he mused, "than just by doping it with pills. In everybody, son, there's something the books call an instinct for self-preservation, which is just another way of saying everybody is afraid. It's what grabbed you by the seat of the pants today and hustled you away from Sid Barst. The same as you'd jump out of the way if a horse started to kick, or jerk back your hand if you accidentally touched a hot stove. It's why you run cattle, so you can sell them, buy yourself food, keep from starving. Call what you did being afraid if you want. But the storekeeper is being just as afraid when he cuts credit off some poor cuss who can't pay; because your storekeeper knows if he starts giving away his merchandise he'll soon go broke and maybe starve himself."

Joel gazed at the floor. "Most folks," he said, "see things different than you, Doc."

Doc Emmet played another card. "Joel," he declared, "I'm just as big a humbug as the next man. You believe I'm a fine doctor, for example, just because I fished a bullet out of you this afternoon. You figure a doctor's a top-hand if he saves your life."

"I wish to hell you hadn't," Joel said.

"Well, I didn't," replied Doc Emmet.

Joel looked up swiftly. "Why—what do you mean?"

Doc Emmet held a card poised. He sighed and for the first time looked directly at Joel. "Son," he said, "you haven't six weeks to live."

Joel stared blankly.

"That bullet bounced off a rib," the old physician explained gently, "did some ripping and tearing. Close to the heart, too damn close. And it's internal, the kind of damage no doctor can ever repair. Oh, it won't happen right off, but in the

end your heart's bound to just stop, like a clock that's run down; it can't possibly go on for more than a few weeks. I was certain even before you left my office this afternoon, son. But keeping you quiet wouldn't help much, at the most just prolong your misery a little. Seemed like I couldn't tell you right off; it was so damn inevitable, so damn incurable that it seemed merciless to make you think about it. But I've decided you ought to know. There's likely affairs you'll want to arrange. Son—sometimes a doctor has to tell folks things he'd a hell of a lot rather leave unsaid."

FOR the moment Joel was stunned. It was as though he had been struck a sudden blow. Now he could understand that uneven pumping of his heart, the strange dizziness, those stabbing pains. He was sensing, too, the irony in what he had done this afternoon, in running away from death when he was already as good as dead. Yes, dead—for Doc Emmet didn't make mistakes.

Doc Emmet played his last card. He said, "That's the first time I ever made this game come out." Then he stood up, walked to the door. He looked back at Joel. "I'm sorry, son—there's nothing more I can say."

"Yes, there is." Joel was suddenly standing up, his eyes cold and bleak. "You can tell me whether my father died by accident."

"So you had a hunch?" asked Doc Emmet.

"Not until today," Joel said. "But now I've got to know. Did you find out anything when you examined dad's body?"

"I found a bullet," Doc Emmet replied quietly, "inside your father's skull. He'd been shot in the back of the head, the wound bashed in with a rock, laid out to look like he'd fallen from his horse and been killed by accident. It was a rifle bullet. From a Mauser."

"A Mauser," Joel said. "And the only man around here owning a Mauser is Sid Barst."

"That's it," agreed the old doctor. "You have it all now. So long, son." He walked outside, closing the door as he left.

Joel stood at a window. He saw the old physician drive out of the ranchyard. He watched the ancient buggy vanish through grayly gleaming mists of moonlight. Had the old doc really been here? Or had it only been his ghost? What a crazy thing to be thinking. . . .

Joel put his back to the window. The pain in his side was emphasized now, like a bright sword turning slowly. He was queerly dizzy; again he felt his heart jump and flutter. He was going to die—in less than six weeks, the old doc had said. And Doc Emmet didn't make mistakes.

This time it wasn't anything he could run from. He couldn't put it off or defeat it. It was like lightning from the sky, inevitable and final.

He wasn't frightened. That surprised him. True, he had a sense of frustration, of loss, of bitterness, but that wasn't fear. It wasn't anything to be ashamed of.

The old doc had said the instinct for self-preservation, to save himself, had made him turn from Barst. Did that instinct cease working, once a man knew he was doomed?

Joel's head lifted. He began to pace back and forth, ignoring pain now, somehow beyond it. Gradually a strange sensation had come over him, a sort of elation, almost an intoxication. It was as though he had been freed, suddenly, from all man's ancient bondage to fear and caution; it was that utter fearlessness, that cold recklessness, known only to the man who suddenly learns he has nothing more to lose.

JOEL rode into town that next morning. At ten o'clock he found Sid Barst in the Corral Saloon. Several cowhands

glanced up, froze suddenly, as Joel came through the batwing doors. He paused, thumbs hooked in cartridge belt, and flung the big cattleman's name across the room like the crack of a whip.

"Barst!"

At the bar, Sid Barst's huge body swirled around. For an instant he stared in surprise. Then he laughed.

He said, "Listen, you yellow-belly, I told you yesterday to get out of this country and stay gone."

"It's time, Barst," Joel said smoothly, "to talk about my father. He didn't die by accident; he died with a bullet in his brain. Fired from a Mauser rifle."

Barst's eyes were faintly startled. Then his enormous body seemed to swell, his cheeks to puff. He was like a gigantic adder preparing to strike.

"All right," he admitted deliberately. "What about it?"

"Just that you and me had only a rehearsal yesterday," Joel said. "We'll put on the whole show today. I'll be waiting for you outside."

He turned, walked out of the saloon. He went a block up the sidewalk, his bootheels making a measured thumping that ceased suddenly as he turned into the dusty street. He faced the saloon and waited. Barst would accept the challenge, would want to. Anyway, before witnesses, he would have no choice.

A cold calm possessed Joel. The pain in his side, a dull throbbing today, served only to sustain him, a constant reminder that he was already doomed, beyond any further earthly harm. He felt no quiver of nerves. He was steady as a rock. No, not even by killing him, could Barst harm him now. He was already dying. He was invulnerable.

Barst came out of the saloon slowly. He walked into the street, faced Joel. He started forward, and Joel advanced to meet him.

In exact detail, they were repeating the macabre march which Joel had terminated so abruptly yesterday. But today it would end differently. This time, Joel knew, there could be no turning back.

The sun was behind Barst, and his great shadow flowed darkly ahead of him. It was like an evil emanation from the man's body itself, ruthlessly leading on the enormously destructive mass of flesh behind.

Barst slowed his pace slightly. It was as though he sensed the strange change in Joel Henderson, was suddenly less brutally confident, a little uncertain. Instinctively Joel pressed that advantage, moved ahead more briskly.

He was confident, coldly confident. He could feel his whole being narrow swiftly into a lancing attention fixed exclusively on Barst's swollen chest. Faster, faster. . . .

Time and space seemed to blend, to eliminate suddenly the whole distance between them. He saw Barst grab wildly for his gun, as if oddly startled. The gun came whipping up, blasted franctically without any fractional pause for aim.

Joel heard the bullet whine harmlessly past. His own gun came smoothly into his hand, jolted solidly as it crashed. Just as he pulled the trigger he thought briefly of his father. So coldly confident was he that he didn't even fire again. He simply stood motionless, his gun pointing slightly upward, trailing a wisp of grayish smoke, and watched sudden disintegration seize the great hulking body of Sid Barst.

It teetered. The eyes were filled with a staring surprise. The gun tipped downward, then fell from Barst's hand. He reached out with spreading fingers as though to grab some invisible support. The fingers clenched slowly. Then the whole mammoth hulk caved forward, blotting out its own black shadow as it fell. A splash of dust burst upward around the fallen body, settled.

Joel holstered his gun. He turned

around and walked away. He knew he could never be afraid again, not even if he was going to live. Death, the assurance that it had already embraced him, had cured him of his fear of death.

OLD Beaver Williams had followed Joel into town, returned to the ranch with an account of what had happened. When Joel got back, the whole outfit gave him their remote grins. There was no doubt that they accepted him once more as the rightful heir to that great "old man" who had been his father.

Then, early that afternoon, old Doc Emmet drove his rig into the ranchyard. He had Linda Gregg with him. Joel came out of the house, met them on the porch.

"Well, son," Doc remarked, "it didn't go so bad, did it?"

"At least," Joel agreed, with cold humor, "you cured me of gun-shyness. That won't ever trouble me again."

"Nothing," elaborated Doc Emmet, "ever troubles a man much, once he makes himself face it. Once you do that, it can't ever bluff you again. That's what I told Linda, when I asked her to come here with me. Why, Joel, your whole life was being ruined. You stood to lose everything you valued, including your self-respect. Life at that price isn't worth it. Barst might possibly have killed you, but—well, the way I saw it, it was kill or cure, anyway."

Linda turned to Joel suddenly. For an instant she clung to him almost fiercely, as though to give him life through the very strength of her slim, vital womanhood.

Then she looked back at Doc Emmet. "Tell him the truth, Doctor," she pleaded.

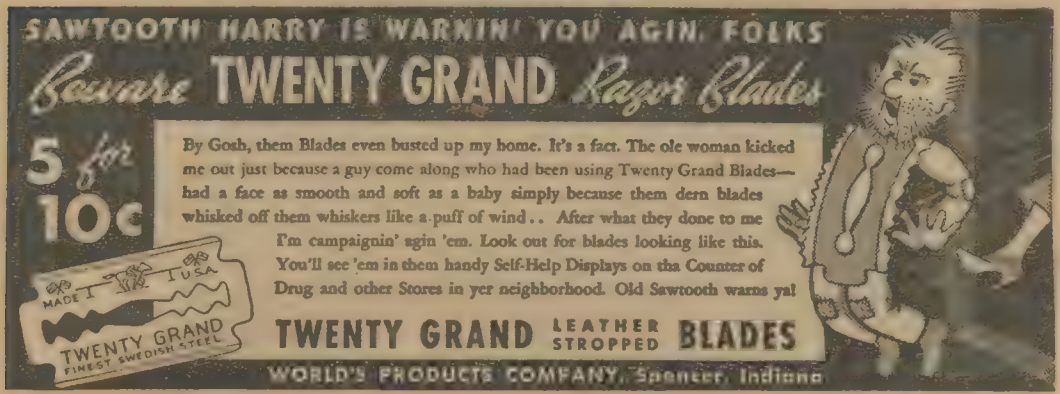
"I lied to you, of course, Joel," Doc Emmet said. "Your heart's strong as a mule's, and you'll probably live to be a hundred."

Joel stared at him blankly. His jaw sagged in amazement.

"Close your mouth," Doc Emmet suggested. "Likely that pretty woman wants to kiss it without getting swallowed. That bullet wound was clean-cut, not in the least serious, but it was bound to hurt like fury at first, and you'd lost so much blood I knew your heart would be jumping and fluttery for a time. That made it easy to make you believe it was permanently damaged, that you were certain to die. And believing that, cured you of being afraid—I mean, as soon as you believed you were going to die regardless, you learned you weren't afraid of anything, son, that you only *believed* you were. I felt the operation was called for. I'm pleased it was a success."

Joel was still bewildered. "Operation?"

"Of course," explained Doc Emmet. "Don't you see, son? What I cut out of you was your instinct for self-preservation."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LINE RIDER OF THE BIG DIE

"Put down that gun an' help us, feller. We're about finished."

Billy Bemus wasn't yellow--he just hadn't grown up. But it took more than the loss of his girl and the contempt of the range to make him see inside himself. Hell had to freeze over to show him that man talk meant fighting talk--and that top-hand cowmen die hard!

CHAPTER ONE

Iron-Fisted Courage

IT WAS dark when Billy Bemus came riding into Red Coulee, for that was the way he had wanted it. He had purposely declined to ride in with the rest of the Rafter 99 outfit, remembering their last visit to town—when they had held his nose and shoved the neck of a whiskey bottle down his throat. He wanted no more of that. In fact, he wanted none of Red Coulee—except to see Sally.

A stirring novelette of a north-range blizzard's supreme test of western manhood

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

So he was riding into the cowland metropolis under cover of darkness, holding his pony to a little foxtrot and casting nervous, bird-like glances along the walks. The place roared with the rough conviviality of the range. All day, the cowboys of a dozen big cattle outfits had been whirling in from the loading pens, to roll

their spurs from saloon to gaming dive to dancehall and back again. Spending their fall wages and whooping it up in the last big celebration of the season. Round-up was over. Already there was a touch of ice in the wind and an overcast sky gave promise of the winter's first snow.

Men roared along the walks. Nickleodeons and tin-panny pianos jangled from the lighted pleasure resorts. Ponies crowded the racks, their backs humped and their frazzy tails tucked to the chill wind. There was little chance of anyone noticing Billy Bemus, yet he rode with his head pulled deep into the upturned collar of his sheepskin coat, trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible.

Kid love for his pony moved Billy to ride into the stable. It would cost him a dollar—a sum begrudged by most horse and rope men as they headed for the long bars and the glittering games. But the Kid wanted no drinking or gambling. He had his pay in his pocket, with nothing to spend it for save perhaps new levis, heavy woolens and maybe some little trinket for Sally. The pony had helped him earn that money. Why shouldn't it have the comfort of double oats, in a warm stall?

The hostler quit his hot stove, in the little cubby office, and came out with a cheery: "H'are yuh, Kid? Yo're late. Reckon a certain little gal I know of is doin' some worritin' as to what's keepin' yuh." He cast a quick glance across at the lights of the American Kitchen, the restaurant where Sally worked.

Billy flushed, growled, "Double oats, Cappy. An' put a blanket onto him until I come for him."

"Yes siree. You betcha, Kid." The words held a hint of laughter as they followed the Kid to the door. And somehow they irked him. Nobody took him seriously, nobody except Sally.

Out on the wind-swept street, Billy Bemus threw back his shoulders and tried to affect a go-to-hell grin—such as Shorty or Buster or the Old Man wore when they were in town. But somehow it wasn't any good. The sting of the stableman's subtle hooraw burned in him. They were all like that, always trying to let on that he was an unweaned button. Hell, he was twenty and earning a man's pay. He could top anything in the rough string, as he had proved. And only last week, the Old Man had told the boys that the Kid was a natural born roper.

The Kid! How he hated that name. He was as big and strong and capable as any man in the outfit. But even as he told himself so, Billy knew there was something else that made him small in their eyes. Something inside. Some vague inferiority that made him look up to Shorty Squiers' five feet four, despite his seven inch advantage in stature.

That never failed to puzzle the Kid. In the bunkhouse rough-and-tumble encounters he more than held his own. But when the brows of older men drew down and fight blazed across their eyeballs, something crawled in the Kid's belly and the blood turned to water in his veins.

A good thing, Billy thought as he swung along the walk, that Sally couldn't look inside of him and see that damning thing. Sally had told him she loved him, had promised to marry him. He must keep it hidden from her, always. For she was gamely sticking to a job she hated, saving her money against the day when Billy would take her out of the restaurant. And, when he had voiced doubts of his future to her, a deep ingrained courage had made her more beautiful than ever.

"Billy—" the Kid could hear the ring of bravery— "we can't fail. We'll make it together. Some day you'll be the biggest brand owner on this range."

THE Kid's steps lagged as he crossed the street and neared the restaurant. He paused for a moment to peer through

the frosted pane. Sally stood behind the counter, joshing with a pair of spurred and booted patrons. Her face was alight and her soft hair was like a yellow halo in the lamplight. To the Kid, she was like a guiding pillar of flame to a man lost in the darkness.

It brought his head up, stiffened his spine. With a little tug at his heart, he rehearsed the pretty speeches he had been preparing for a week. They seemed to escape him now that the moment was at hand and, with something like panic, Billy passed right by the door, bumping solidly into someone moving just outside the rectangle of light splashing onto the walk.

A hard hand reached out to grasp him. A heavy voice snarled: "Where in the hell are you goin', bustin' into a man this —oh, it's you, Kid."

It was the Old Man. Truman Orp, boss of the Rafter 99. He wasn't old; not much past thirty-five. A broad-shouldered, lean-hipped, quick-muscled man with a fighting jaw, a great shock of black hair and eyes fired with a recklessness that made even the toughest waddies jump when he spoke. There was no crawling in the Old Man's guts when some puncher went on the prod. He welcomed any kind of a ruckus, laughed as he fought and stood aside for no man. There was whiskey on his breath now and an ugliness in his eyes that came when he was drunk.

Billy muttered: "Gosh, boss, I didn't see you. Sorry if I shouldered you."

HE tried to ease past, but the Old Man whirled him back. "Where the hell you goin' in such an all-fired hurry?"

"Why—er—I was goin' to see Sally."

"She's behind you, fool. Sally, eh? Humph!" The Old Man stared at him, owlishly. "Seems to me I recall you was hangin' around her a lot last time we came to town."

Anger touched the Kid. "What of it?" he flared. "Any law against that? Any skin off your nose?"

The speech surprised him. And it seemed to surprise the cowman. He recoiled a pace, grinning in the way he had when aroused. "Damn right it is, button," he said, too softly. "It's my business if I care to make it such. As one man to another, what you figgerin' on, hangin' around that gal?"

"I'm—I'm going to marry Sally."

The Old Man started, as if he had been slapped. His grin deepened. "You're what? Have my ears gone back on me entire? Say that over again."

"Sally an' me—we're going to get married."

"Well, I'm damned. You, a half-baked kid that ain't dry behind the ears, talkin' about takin' a wife! Have the boys got you drunk, feller? Why, you ain't makin' enough to keep you in levis an' smokin', let alone support a woman. You're crazy."

"Mebbyso." The Kid swallowed hard. "Just the same—that's how it is."

The cowman vented a tight laugh. "What can a kid like you do for Sally?"

"Work for her," snapped the youth, "build her a home, save my money an' set out to start an iron of my own."

"A man's job, Kid. Not a chore for a button."

"Damn you!" Billy's voice rose, and that damning crawling was in his insides. "You're always saying that. You've got all the rest saying it. I ain't no button. I'm a man grown, as good a man as you've got on the outfit, accordin' to your own words."

"Let's see if you are, Kid."

The Old Man's meaty palm moved in a swinging arc, crashing solidly against Billy's face. He saw it coming and had plenty time to duck, but he seemed paralyzed. The blow knocked him against the building front—all that saved him from going down. The Rafter 99 boss

stood planted before him, hands on his hips, laughing at him, taunting him.

"A fightin' man, figgerin' on takin' a wife. Plannin' to go out an' buck some tough ones, eh? Show me how you aim to do it, Kid."

AN URGE to kill blazed through the Kid. But he seemed frozen up inside. His right hand, far from hovering close to the gun at his thigh, rubbed his bruised jaw. The cowman spat, stepped in. Billy threw out his hands, protectingly. Truman Orp brushed them down and hit him in the nose, then rocked his head with swinging fists.

Senses shaken, the Kid hardly knew he had struck a blow. But there was Orp reeling back, tripping on his spurs and sitting down—hard. He same up with a roar, and it was that crawling fear in his belly that drove Billy to meet him. Crash of flesh against flesh. A cyclone of blows smothered the Kid. And the next he knew, he was sitting on the walk, staring up stupidly at the raging cowman. Failing to coax him onto his feet, the Old Man lifted him by his collar, batted him down again, spat on him and walked away. And then, for the first time, Billy noticed the ring of delighted onlookers, laughing heartily at him.

"I'll say this for you, button," hollered someone. "You pick 'em big an' tough when you go to war. Lucky you stuck to fists, instead of goin' for that gun you're bogged down with."

Hooraws. Gibes. Ridicule. Not one friendly hand to help him up. Dizzily, the Kid climbed to his feet and reeled toward the outskirts of the town. He was lonely and beaten. One eye was closing. His left ear throbbed painfully. There was a salty taste of blood in his mouth. Scalding tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Kid!" he sobbed. "A damn squawlin' brat, that's what I am. An' I reckon I'll never be no different."

He walked and he walked, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his coat. He longed to see Sally, but he knew he couldn't face her, marked up like he was. It began to snow, the chill white flakes a blessing to his swollen face. A vengeful wind kicked up, pouring its frigid breath down from the north. The snowfall came in, swirling horizontally, fast assuming blizzard proportions.

Discomfort of bucking the blast turned Billy Bemus around. The wind blew him back into town. Miserable ponies were hunched at the racks. Saloon doors were banging open to emit drunken men. They carried their drinks with them, roaring salutes and bellowing defiance to the first storm of winter.

The Kid hated them in that moment. And he admired them, too. For they were first of all men, reckless, hard-fisted men who would fight at the drop of a hat. Wherein did they differ from him, the Kid asked himself. Was it because they drank, caroused and flung their money around? Was that what made a man bold? Was that what kept the cold, crawling spasms out of a man's stomach?

Sudden determination to get drunk hit the Kid. Purposefully, he strode along the walk toward the lighted entryway of the biggest saloon. Let them laugh at him. He would laugh with them. He came into the splash of light thrown through the window of the American Kitchen, looked in. What he saw brought him up short. Sally was leaning across the counter, smiling into the eyes of Truman Orp. And her slim, warm hands were held in his big rough paws.

CHAPTER TWO

Hell Freezes Over

THAT picture burned like a coal of fire into Billy Bemus' brain, driving out all thought of getting drunk, numbing his ability to think clearly about anything.

Sally and the Old Man! That's why the boss had beaten him.

Like one possessed, the Kid moved along the walks, struggling with bitterness, disappointment, anger and fear. One by one, the smaller places of business closed and the exodus of cowpunchers began. His eyes fixed on the front of the American Kitchen, Billy held his vigil in a draughty vault between two buildings.

He saw the Old Man leave at last, saw the lights begin to wink out in the restaurant. He waited only until Truman Orp's tall form disappeared through the portal of the Cattleman's Saloon, then he walked over and entered the eating place. Sally, her hat and coat already on, was reaching to turn out the counter light. His footbeat caused her to wheel.

"Billy! Wherever have you been? And your face—you're hurt!"

The Kid remained rooted with the door at his back, looking at Sally without knowing what to do or say as she came to him to lay a soothing palm against his bruises. She led him to a stool, bathed his face with warm water, then brought him hot coffee and a wedge of pie. It was not until he had eaten and until he had satisfied himself that her wonted sweetness toward him was unchanged that he dared break the awkward silence.

"I'd uh been here sooner, Sally, but I had some trouble."

"Bad trouble, Billy?"

"Bad enough. I reckon I won't be workin' for the Rafter 99 no more. I—I'll have to stir up somethin' else."

She squeezed his hand, comfortingly. "Don't worry, honey."

His chin came up. "I'm not worryin', Sally. I'll get something soon an' work hard all winter. Come spring, I'll have enough to give us the start we planned."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Billy. All the outfits are laying off the men they don't need in their line camps. Then there's something else I have to tell you. Dad Tucker has sold this place to a Chinaman. They take it over the first of the year. That means there'll be no place for me in Red Coulee. Dad and Mother Tucker don't know just what they will do, but they want me to stay with them so they can look after me, as they promised my mother before she died. It looks like—"

Billy Bemus jumped up, startled. "Sally!" he protested. "You can't leave Red Coulee. It will bust up all our plans. Listen, I'll give up ridin' an' land some sort of a job here in town. In the stable, mebby, or the store or the feed yard—"

Her face fell. "And give up all your plans to own your own spread, Billy? No, you can't do that. Anyhow, how can you hope to find a job here in town, with so many men turned off?"

FURY convulsed the Kid's face. "I ain't givin' up my plans," he raged. "But I've gotta do something. I've gotta work. An' I'll make 'em give me a job, you hear me. I'll make 'em—"

In a frenzy, he flung past her, raging out the door and into the storm. The cold wind shocked reason into him and he was calmer as he walked into the General Store. He found the proprietor in his little office, at the back, and the man heard him out with a merchant's long practiced patience.

"Sorry, Billy," he said, when the Kid was finished. "Winter's our slack time and I'll have to let one of my regular clerks go. You're about the tenth cowboy to come in here today, hoping for a warm winter berth beside the cracker barrel. I guess a puncher never learns to save his summer wages."

"I did save mine," said the Kid, moodily. "That's the trouble. I put my money into ponies, fast as I made it. They're rangin' Cheyenne Flats—a small start toward my future cow outfit."

The most the kindly store man could

do was to pat him on the back and commend his thrift. And, a little less certain than before, Billy set out to make the rounds. It was the same story in the town's two other mercantile stores. Snow had come to mantle the range and slow up trade. There was nothing open. The feed and fuel yard had hired a spare man only that morning. The old stableman offered the Kid groceries and the use of the stable office as a bachelor apartment in return for cleaning stalls and forking down hay from the mow. It was a gesture of helpfulness but it didn't further Billy's plans. He turned it down as graciously as he could and started touring the crowded saloons. He braced a half dozen cattlemen who looked at him like they thought him drunk.

HOURS later, saddened with the virus of defeat, he stood shivering in the wind, staring over across at the darkened windows of the American Kitchen. The emptiness of that front, seen through a curtain of swirling snow, seemed a symbol of the aching void where his heart had been. Sally had gone home to bed. And, though she was hardly a stone's throw from where he stood, she might as well have been a thousand miles away.

He had lost her, he told himself bitterly, to Truman Orp. He was at his wits end, cold, numb with grief, beaten, lacking the incentive to go on, and a little envious of the wild creatures that would die in this blizzard.

Sighing audibly and with no conscious purpose, he turned to move along the walk. A tall figure stood close to him, in the gloom. A voice spoke his name.

"Kid!"

Billy jumped, stiffened defensively. It was Truman Orp. "What you want now?" he snapped. "Ain't you done me enough harm already?"

"Question is," rumbled the cowman, advancing to face him, "how much good I've done you tonight. That remains to be seen. Listen, this storm is buildin' up big. Before morning, the range will be snowed under, with the cattle driftin' to hell."

"Hope they do," said the Kid, bitterly. "Serve you right."

"I've sent the boys out to the feedin' shacks," said the Rafter 99 boss, as if he hadn't heard. "An' I've been lookin' all over for you."

"Yeah?" snarled the youngster. "An' now that you've found me—?"

"You better get your pony and set out for the Bluestem Flats line shack. You'll have all you can do to make it, with snow driftin' like it is, so you better not waste any time. The cabin's stocked with grub an' there's plenty blankets to keep you warm. You—"

"You mean," cried the Kid, "that I ain't fired?"

"Don't talk like a fool," rapped Orp. "Get out there an' start the feedin'. I want you to scatter hay an' drive in the critters from the coulees. Feed just enough to keep 'em on their feet, 'cause we don't know how long this is gonna last or how many of these blizzards we'll have before spring. Now don't give me no augerment. Get on your pony an' make tracks, before the drifts cut you off."

Words caught and hung in the Kid's tight throat. He wanted to refuse. He wanted to curse the big rancher who had beaten him earlier in the evening. He did neither. The sweet face of Sally reared before his eyes.

He gulped and said, "Sure, boss. I'm on my way." And he was running toward the stable.

"Kid!" Billy paused, flung around. "If this weather holds, every man will have his work cut out for him. You're drawin' pay, somethin' a lot of good men ain't doin' after tonight. Try to earn your money, every minute of the time till the breakup, will you?"

"Sure," gulped Billy, puzzled by this strange change of front. "You can bet all you've got I will."

Then he was running to the stable, his face working and emotion rioting within him. It was like a miracle. He wanted to go to the Tucker house, wake up Sally and tell her the glad news. But fear was in him that the Old Man might change his mind. So he left word for Sally with the barn man, buttoned the collar and sleeves of his fleece-lined coat and set out for Bluestem Flats.

FOR a while he was immune to the frigid breath of the blizzard, so busy was his mind. It was only thirty miles or so to the line shack. When the weather cleared, as it must within a few days, he could find time to ride in and see Sally.

The Old Man was pretty decent after all, for he could have sent the Kid to the Dead Man line cabin, too far to even think of ridin' in. The house at Bluestem Flats was of tight-chinked logs; it would be well stocked with grub. There was a good stove in the place and fuel was handy. Moreover, there was a tight lean-to for his pony. Every cent he made would be available, come summer, and then—

It was a pleasing prospect until he thought of the Chinaman buying the American Kitchen, of Sally going away with the Tuckers. The first of the year, she had said. He'd ride down for Christmas, he told himself, and talk it over with her. They could work out something.

Still the worry of it clung to his mind and he began to feel the cold. How far had Truman Orp gone with Sally? He got to wondering about the cowman's strange behavior and could only deduce that Orp had kept him on and sent him to the remote line camp to get him out of the girl's sight. Sally too had acted strangely. Mebbe it had been her suggestion. Wild ideas built into monsters to devil him. A small voice bade him turn about and nip in the bud the scheme to shelve him. But thought of facing the Old Man again turned him sick inside. He kept the horse headed on.

Thirty miles. Thirty long wind-swept, snow-piled, freezing miles. And fifteen of those miles a heart-breaking, nerve-wracking experience for a cowboy unused to walking—a cowboy who led his floundering pony and struggled onward through knee-deep drifts. Heavy of heart, disturbed of mind, chilled to the marrow. He was careless as to whether he lived or died, yet he never faltered in the struggle to live, to take up his thankless duties at the line shack. Even he could not understand why.

The last five miles of that trip was a bitter battle. Yet not once did the Kid lose nerve as he fell and rose, fell and rose again, to strive against the raging storm that blinded him, that froze his hands and face and feet.

He began to talk to himself, and once he lifted his shrill voice against the roar of the wind. "Damn him!" he shrieked. "Damn the Old Man to hell!"

With his pony lurching crazily behind him, he bent low and pushed on against the storm that whined and moaned and whispered endlessly of death. Thirty miles of hell—for what? Over and over he asked himself that. A dread drowsiness obsessed him. Why didn't he lie down and sleep? Why didn't he let the snow cover him, shield him from the the wind? They'd find him in the spring—yeah, the coyotes.

Night that had held but half of its fourteen hour span for him. Dawn, smutty as a buzzard's wing. A thick, frost bitten daylight, with the sun hidden behind a pall as gray as death. Weariness dragging the Kid down, begging him to take the few minutes' rest that would

stretch into eternity. Billy wasn't afraid of that, for freezing to death was only going to sleep. But his pony—maybe that was what kept him lurching on, snarling at his suffering, cursing the insidious, creeping numbness.

And so, after he had lost all track of time, and direction was nothing more than an instinct with him, he saw the cabin looming before him. Bluestem Flats. Only one born to the vagaries of the rangeland could have hit his target like that, across thirty miles of hell.

Billy crashed against the door of the lean-to, got his pony inside. Somehow he got off the saddle, closed the door against the blast and went into the house. It was cold as a tomb. Snow had drifted under the door and the Kid used it to rub his face, his hands and his feet. Not until he felt the sting of returning circulation did he make a fire in the stove. He put on coffee and gulped it scalding hot. After which he stumbled to a bunk, fell into it and pulled blankets over him. He knew no more.

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Wolves in the Night

YOUTH recoils briefly from the impact of punishment, then bounces back stronger for the conflict. Billy Bemus woke in the dawn of another day. His hands and feet were swollen; his face was black and sore. But he was ravenously hungry as he got a fire going in the stove and started breakfast.

The storm still thundered, the snow having drifted over the windows on the north. It was impossible to do anything outside, so he stayed in all that day, and the one following. The swelling in his feet went down so he could get his boots on.

The third dawn broke clear. A heavy crust had frozen over the snow. The bawling of cattle struck into him as he ate breakfast. He found them in a nearby coulee, where they had tumbled as they drifted. Across the flats, he could see a scattering of hunched critters standing where they had been stopped by a drift fence. Saddling his pony, Billy rounded the miserable creatures up and drove them to the fenced stacks, not far from the house. He fed them, then rode a wide circle, driving in others.

There was a sun in the sky, but it held no warmth. And, after a few hours, even the great golden ball was hidden by another pall of gray. The wind was never still and there were teeth in it. Swaddled to the eyes, the Kid worked with the cattle. He found two injured beeves that he shot, returning to the house with fresh meat.

One hour was like another, and so it was with the days. Each evening found the Kid exhausted, each morning renewed. Each night he cut a notch in his count stick, against a thaw that would permit him time to get down to Red Coulee. But there was no thaw.

Another storm swept down upon the flats, adding to the snow pack, bringing more cattle drifting before it and making the feeding a bitter chore. And, though he fed sparingly, he knew the hay would never last unless the weather turned fair and enough snow melted to permit the cattle to paw for the dead grass. He found himself hoping that the Old Man would come out from the ranch to talk it over. He needed moral support.

The storm passed, but the wolfish wind held and frost filled the air. Feeding took all of the Kid's time, thanks to new cattle drifting in from the north. Some of the new arrivals wore the Anchor Cross—an outfit fifty miles to the northwest. Billy was in some doubt about feeding these critters. What would the Old Man say if the hay ran out, from feeding critters ironed with foreign brands. But the problem solved itself. He could not feed Rafter 99 stuff and keep other voracious

animals away. There wasn't enough of him.

It turned warmer, softening the snow and making progress difficult for man, horse and cow. It did bring hope to the Kid that it would open the coulees and clear the range, a hope blasted when he awoke one morning with snow falling again. The overworked youngster was blue, discouraged, lonely, wishing for the comfort of a few minutes with the Old Man, when he heard a voice hailing the cabin. Grabbing up a rifle, the Kid jumped up and ran into the storm. A horse loomed through the murk.

First look and Billy knew it wasn't the Old Man. Nor was it one of his bunkhouse mates from the Rafter 99. Two men were astraddle the one pony. One swung down, easing the other's body into his arms. The second man was unconscious.

"Put down that gun an' help us, feller," yelled the fellow who supported the unconscious man. "We're about finished."

AND so they were. The Kid got the far-gone pair into the house. As he rubbed them with snow, he found that the drowsy, mumbling one was wounded. He had a bad looking hole in the side and Billy lifted questioning eyes to the other man. The fellow's face twisted in a snarly smile.

"Yeah—drilled. But Lefty's tough. Lay off him an' get that pony inside, will yuh? An' fetch in the saddlebags."

"But—" The Kid's protest was cut off a-borning.

"Don't give me no augerment, Kid. Do as I tell yuh. Fetch in them bags."

The man's gray eyes were like agate and there were two guns at his thighs. The hatchet face was convulsed with a passion the Kid had never seen in a human face before. It made his insides writhe and he drifted outside.

It took him minutes to remove the snow so he could get the stable door open. He brought the spent pony in and drew the saddle, gasping at the weight of it. After covering the jaded beast with an old blanket he lifted the heavy saddlebags and took them into the house. They gave off a musical *clink* as he laid them on the rude table.

Again he looked at the hatchet-faced man. The fellow grinned fiercely.

"Yep, you've guessed it, Kid. That's gold in there. But don't get curious or do any figgerin' about it. Just treat us right until after this storm's over, keep yore mouth shut an' you won't lose by it. You savvy?"

Billy gulped, nodded. The short, moon-faced man was unconscious in the bunk, his breath irregular and bubbly. "He's bad hurt," he volunteered. "Ain't there something I can do for him?"

The man laughed roughly. "Ain't nothin' you or me can do. Unless you can cut him open an' take out a .45 slug. I don't reckon it makes any difference. Damn him, he orta bin more careful about stoppin' lead. He'll die, I reckon, an' me an' you will be the better off for it. Let him be an' rangle me up some coffee."

There was something so savage about this man as to chill Billy Bemus' blood. Food seemed to revive the hatchet-faced man and hot coffee poured down the throat of the unconscious man brought him around. For long minutes, he stared at Billy, puzzled, wondering. Then he turned his eyes to his grinning companion.

"Solo," he croaked, "who in the hell is this? Where at are we?"

"Take it easy, Lefty. We stumbled onto a line camp an' this cowpuncher taken us in. Everything's gonna be all right. By the way, Kid, what outfit is this?"

"Rafter 99," said Billy. "Bluestem Flats."

"Rafter 99?" The wounded man laughed hysterically. "Truman Orp's outfit?"

"Yes," said Billy, and then both of them were laughing.

"Truman Orp! Lordy, ain't that a boot in the britches?"

"Shore is a lulu. We knock Orp over for his herd money, then hole up in one of his line shacks, eat his grub an' let one of his punchers look after us. He can't get to us an' wouldn't think to look for us here if he could. That's rich."

The Kid started and Solo eyed him narrowly. "Don't see nothin' funny about that, do you, Kid? Mebby you'd like to make something of it." His swollen right hand went to the big gun at his thigh.

Billy shrugged. "Why should I? Truman Orp sent me out here to kill myself for his thirty an' beans, so he could have a free hand buildin' up to my gal."

"Now yo're gettin' smart, Kid," applauded Solo. "These cowmen get rich off what gents like you do for 'em. Never was a one of 'em that gave a man a fair shake. Only way to get square with 'em is like me an' Lefty done. Play with us an' you'll live to laugh at his kind."

HIS suggestion twanged the hard strung wire of bitterness in Billy Bemus. Yet, even as he approved, he glanced at the shelves that held his winter food supply. He alone had made quite a dent in it. With three mouths to feed, it would soon be exhausted. Well, what did it matter? According to his tally stick, it was only a week until Christmas. He'd go down to see Sally and leave this pair here to worry about the food. His eyes were drawn to the saddlebags on the table. Word of that, carried to the sheriff at Red Coulee, would take the sting out of the Old Man's anger at his leaving his horned charges. Still it left the Kid cold and scared.

That night the two outlaws slept in the bunks and Billy stretched out on the floor, by the stove. Twice he awoke, stiff with cold, to build up the fire. Lefty was babbling in a semi-conscious stupor—his words only broken bits of sentences about a gunfight at the Red Coulee Bank. Each time Billy roused, Solo was staring at him from the bunk, watchful and silent. It was a situation to waken dread in the Kid's veins.

Next morning, Billy was awakened by Solo bellowing at him. "Shake out of it, Kid! This place is colder'n a grave. Rangle up some wood an' cook some breakfast. A man would think you was boardin' here, instead of gettin' paid to run the place."

Rebellion flared in the youth, but the man's eyes were hard and daring. Lefty tossed and moaned, laughed and cursed, in delirium. Profoundly disturbed, Billy pulled on his boots and went out after wood. It continued to snow, a fact that frightened him. Cripes, was it going to storm all winter? If it didn't let up, he'd never get out of Bluestem Flats. . . .

Four days later, the storm still held. The interim had been hell for Billy Bemus. Wearing himself out at the stacks during the all too brief daylight hours, returning to the cabin to wait upon the two outlaws. Lefty's fever had dropped and he seemed stronger. Solo was quite recovered from his exposure, but spent most of his time hugging the stove, never offering to help the overworked youngster. If the prospect made the Kid blue, it filled Solo with a savage satisfaction.

"Lucky day for me when I stumbled onto yore camp, Kid. An' my luck's gettin' better all the time. Snow driftin' deeper an' deeper to keep out them I don't want to see. Hawsses can't cross the range now an' a man would need wings to cover more'n ten mile of it."

That night Billy lay on the floor by the stove, worrying about that last statement, wondering if he could make Red Coulee

if he wanted to. He had planned to spend Christmas with Sally. To do that he would have to leave in the morning—on foot, for a horse would only flounder and hold him back. Over and over, he weighed the facts. His doubts regarding his ability to win through were very real, but his fear was for remaining on with these two lawless men who would think nothing of killing him to close his lips. Before he fell asleep, he had made up his mind.

Next morning, preparing breakfast, he managed to secrete a slab of bacon inside his shirt. And he ate heavily. He'd need food to see him across the frozen thirty miles to Red Coulee.

Lefty, definitely on the mend, got up to eat with them. He was gaunt and weak, but already he was looking ahead to the day Billy feared.

"Kid, how many ponies you got here?" Lefty wanted to know.

"Only one," said Billy. "Mine an' the one you rode in on."

"Humph. Feedin' our pony good, Kid?"

"He's getting the same care mine is," Billy replied.

"Good. Don't spare the hay with them brutes. We want 'em fat an' frisky when we haul outa here, don't we, Solo?"

"You mean you're figgerin' on takin' my pony?" Billy's brows drew down.

"Why not?" From Solo. "You ain't runnin' from nobody, are yuh? You ought to have had more ponies here, but long as you ain't you won't suffer none. They'll come out sooner or later to fix you up with hawssflesh. But us—"

Bleak-faced, Billy rose without another word, pulled on his coat, jammed on his hat and left the room. So that was it? If he voiced objection to losing his pony, they'd gut-shoot him and let him lay. That settled it. He'd hit for Red Coulee, notify the sheriff and have these two picked up before they rode away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cowmen Die Hard

BILLY found the wind eased up, but it was still spitting snow. He paused just a moment, staring into the gray-white murk shrouding the trail to Red Coulee. As he stood there, steeling himself for the most desperate test of his life, a sound came to his ears. It was the pitiful, plaintive bawling of hungry cattle about the haystacks. Like a magnet, it drew him. His stomach was crawling.

They saw him coming, those gaunt, rough-coated brutes, turned glassy eyes upon him with a heart-rending appeal. He had seen the same thing before, but always when about to answer it. Now he was going away, leaving the forlorn beasts to the mercies of heartless killers.

For a long time time, Billy fought revulsion. His eyes ran along the line of depleted stacks. Feed wouldn't last much longer and the horned brutes would die despite his labors. Life, he reflected, must be as sweet to them as to a man. Yet man had a chance, even when bucking drifts and freezing weather through thirty miles of hell. If he left his charges, he condemned them to death without a chance.

Suddenly he had a wild impulse to cut the wire and turn his back upon the rush to finish the hay. Then he recalled his words to the Old Man.

"Sure, boss. You can bet all you've got I'll earn my money all the time."

It was the first thought he had found to anchor his purpose to. It was a trust, a solemn promise made in gratitude—in a land where the spoken word was a contract more sacred and binding than a legal document. The will to fight was a flame leaping through his being. Fear, the deviling thing that had made him walk with shame before, seeped away from him, replaced by iron. In that one moment, one of the miracles of life was made

manifest in Billy Bemus. In the space of thought, he had changed from a boy to a man.

He turned his face toward Red Coulee and lifted his voice into the wind: "Sorry, Sally, but you'll have to wait. I can't come now."

Choking, he put down his head and charged with his hayfork at the stacks. He worked desperately, feeling a sense of growing power in the effort and waves of satisfaction as the famished cattle fell upon the hay he scattered for them. He worked until the weakness of hunger was on him, then he returned to the house. He found the two outlaws tilted back in chairs, their feet against the stove. The table was covered with dirty dishes and the woodbox was empty. They had eaten heartily again and Solo was picking his teeth with a villainous looking knife.

"Hello, Kid. You was slow gettin' in, so me an' Lefty et. Just throwed the last wood in the stove; better go out an' fetch some in."

Billy stood with his back to the door, convulsed with rage, made savage by the fever born of cabins where men are long cooped up together. Strange, this pair didn't look as big nor half as tough as they had at breakfast.

"You filthy, lazy scourings," he blazed at them. "Layin' around here stuffin' your bellies an' toastin' your shins while I work my head off. Doin' nothin', not even cleanin' up your mess, then expectin' me to wait on you when I'm so tired I don't even want to eat. I'm fed up on it, you understand? Plumb fed up."

Lefty's eyes widened and his chair legs hit the floor with a bang. Solo came bouncing to his feet, his bearded cheeks jerking. "What in the hell's got into you, Kid?"

"The devil's got into me," snapped Billy. "An' you two are going to find it out. Drag on your boots an' get out there after wood. An' you, Lefty, crawl up onto your legs an' muck up them dishes."

"Gettin' tough, eh?" sneered Solo. "Two can play it, son—"

HE whirled, lunging toward the bunk where his gun lay across the precious saddlebags. Billy, startled that his insides were not acting up, moved. His long arm swung an arc. Solo tumbled. Lefty, screaming a curse, caught up the steaming teakettle but Billy knocked him down before he could throw it. The Kid, alert to the sound of Solo scuttling across the floor, whirled from Lefty as the hatchet-faced man palmed his gun. But Billy was first, his pistol sweeping out to cover both of them.

"Drop it, Solo," he croaked, and his voice frightened himself. "Drop it, or I'll let you have it. If need be, I'll kill you both, 'cause God knows I've no cause to love you."

Solo dropped the gun, climbed up. He forced a grin. "You win, Kid. I reckon we all went a little cabin loco, eh? No need to get ringy. Me an' Lefty will make hands from here out."

"You'll get wood," said the Kid, coldly. "An' Lefty will do the dishes. If that don't suit, you'll both fork your scrub pony an' pack across the snow. The choice to me is slight."

Solo nodded, went outside. Lefty limped over to the table to clear the plates of food. "Cripes, Kid," he whined. "I wouldn't crowd Solo if I was you. He's killed men for less."

Strangely, it didn't frighten the Kid, that threat. He continued to lord it over the outlaws, adding insult to injury by allowing them to have their guns. That, in itself, seemed to do more than anything else to tame them, that and the draw the Kid had flashed.

They fell to willingly enough. The cabin was mucked out and the woodbox filled. That afternoon Solo went out with Billy to help scatter hay. He was on his

good behavior, but Billy didn't trust him to the extent of growing careless. He never would again.

"Why bust yourself in two feedin' these walkin' skeletons?" asked Solo, during the course of the afternoon. "You'll draw yore pay whether they live or die an' nobody will thank you for savin' 'em, on a range where thousands of cattle are dyin' right this minute. Besides, what you gonna do when the hay is gone?"

The Kid had thought about that a lot. What could he do when the hay was eaten up? There seemed no answer until, late that night, Solo seemed to divine his thoughts.

"You've got guts, Kid," he grinned. "A heap more'n I figgered. You don't have to worry about nothin'. Give over botherin' about them cattle—except mebby a few of the best to keep us in beef. Me an' Lefty will pay you twice what yo're makin' from Orp till we pull out of here, together. Then we'll cut you in on all future jobs, share an' share alike. Don't that beat a bunch of mangy cows?"

"Maybe it does," said Billy, and his voice sounded strange. "Lefty, it's your night to sleep on the floor." He rolled into his bunk, his gun beside his pillow and his eyes missing nothing of the owlish look Solo gave Lefty.

BLEAK days and bitter nights, with men's tempers growing short as Billy drove the two outlaws to bear an equal part of the burden. They complained continually, damning him for a crazed fool to labor so with the cattle. The Kid's response was simple and logical.

"I gotta keep 'em alive," he said, doggedly. "This is the year of the Big Snow an' cattle will be worth their weight in gold, come spring."

Strangely enough, he was thinking of the Old Man when he said that. At first they thought it only folly. But as day followed day, as storm followed storm and freeze followed freeze, the idea began to grow on them. Already they were conserving the food supply as zealously as was Billy Bemus. Now, suddenly, they strove to apply the same economy to the dwindling hay stores. They were keeping life in the cattle, hardening themselves to match the Kid's efforts, lick for lick. They were sitting by the stove, one night after supper, when Solo came out with it.

"Look, Kid, you admit hatin' Truman Orp's guts for stealin' yore gal. An' why shouldn't you hate a man who wrings the last drop of sweat from a man for thirty an' beans. You were right about these critters bein' worth their weight in gold, but you never could save 'em, not alone. But with me an' Lefty helpin' like we are—"

"Go on," said the Kid, coldly.

"Well, Kid, we will have earned the brutes. Come the break-up, we'll drive 'em north to the badlands, work over the brands an' deal 'em off for real money. What do you say?"

Refusal trembled on the Kid's lips—and died there. Why not? The Old Man had taken Sally by now and turn about would be fair play. To Billy, she had been worth more than all the cattle on the range. Orp would be paying a small price for the ache of loneliness and defeat he had put in the Kid's heart.

"Why not?" he repeated the words aloud.

Then the two of them were howling their joy, slapping him on the back, praising him, promising him their full support. And the Kid grinned fiercely through the demonstration, feeling the first glow in months. The future, dark and troubled until now, was suddenly lit by the bright glare of gold.

The weather remained bad. Storm followed storm, with only brief periods of partial clearing in between. The Kid became a fierce taskmaster and sometimes

he smiled grimly as he realized how completely they were allowing him to dominate them. When the hay ran out, they lost their enthusiasm, conceding defeat. But the Kid bullied them.

"Like hell we'll quit. We're just beginnin' to fight. There's feed under the snow an' you gents are helpin' me bare it for them critters."

Next day they fashioned a crude go-devil, designed to turn up furrows in the snow pack. To this, they hitched the ponies. It was slow and bitter work. Sometimes all three had to pull with the animals—man-killing effort. But they turned up the frozen grass for the bawling herd. The cattle fell in behind them, feeding greedily. Back and forth, never quitting while there was an hour of daylight unspent.

There remained only beef now and a few beans and some flour. Wearied to a point of exhaustion, they slept like dead men. Gray days, freezing days, Billy held them to it. They became as gaunt as their horned charges. Their eyes sank back into their heads and their faces were black and scabbed with frost. Their clothes wore thin and were reinforced with pieces of tarp.

Times were when the outlaws collapsed and the kid had to carry them into the cabin and care for them, too. He was thin to a point of emaciation, but not once did the flame of his vitality flicker. His muscles were like corded steel beneath his skin. In those last days, his companions were of little use to him. They were done. But the Kid went on. As Solo put it: "You ain't even got sense enough to die, when you've killed yoreself."

The break came in the night. Billy woke with a sense of strange silence gripping the world. The wind, restless for months, was still. And somewhere outside, water was dripping. The kid split his lungs as he came up off the floor. He darted to the door, flung it open. A strangely balmy air crowded past him. Dawn was breaking, clear and blue, and chunks of snow were plopping off the cabin roof.

For a long time those three bearded, frost-burned men stood there in the doorway staring out into the mystery. The cattle were bawling, a strange new note supplanting their plaintiveness. The earth seemed to vibrate with renewed life and the Chinook wind played a gladsome tune through the harp strings of the boxelder tree in the yard.

It was spring, and it affected the three scarecrows differently. Solo laughed, in great full-throated bursts. Lefty cursed, blubbering like a baby. Billy just stared with a bleak look on his face. There was something lacking in this miracle of life. He was thinking of Sally.

CHAPTER SIX

Man Brand for a Yearling

EVERY hour made a difference in the landscape, under the caress of that warm wind. By nightfall, the dead grass was showing on high points where the snowpack was thin. Next morning the ridges between the furrows they had plowed were gone. The two outlaws were nervous, continually casting anxious glances toward the east, in the direction of Red Coulee.

"Gotta get outa here—an' fast," husked Solo. "We'll have gents out from town in a day or two an' we want 'em to find the shack empty. Lefty, go in an' cook up the rest of that beef, before it spoils. We'll be eatin' on the run, once we start them critters north."

"She'll be mighty boggy," warned the Kid. "Le's me an' you saddle up an' look the flats over. Gotta know what we're up against."

So they rode out with the ponies, Billy and Solo, leaving Lefty behind. The soft

wind was a blessing against their cracked cheeks. The coulees were roaring bank full and still rising. Water was already standing in the lower reaches. Snowbanks were slushy. Flocks of noisy magpies were materializing from nowhere. Such was the scene.

But it was death the Kid noticed. Unthawed carcasses were coming to light as the snow melted. In that short ride, the Kid saw a hundred of them. And it must be so all over the range. It made him heavy hearted. He did not know that he was looking at what cattlemen were to call the Big Die, for years and years. That terrible winter when a million head perished in Montana and Wyoming. How could he suspect that dozens of rich cattlemen—rich in the fall—would collect and sell cow bones for the money to make a fresh start?

Billy and Solo decided that if they were to get the cattle out, it must be now—before more snow melted. They returned to the cabin, Billy silent and subdued now that the moment was here, Solo reassuming his role of leadership. The hatchet-faced outlaw barked orders to Lefty, shouted at the Kid. Food was wrapped in blankets, tied behind the cantles.

Moodily, Billy said: "One of these brutes has to carry double. Better put the dead load on the other one."

Solo, just tying the heavy saddlebags on Billy's own pony, lifted his eyes. They startled the Kid. They were agate again, filled with the same slumbering fury that had been there when Solo first arrived. Sullenly, the man said: "Kid, I've taken more offa you than I have off any man in my life. That's done an' over with. You'll keep yore mouth shut an' do what yo're told from here out."

Billy Bemus didn't answer at once. The blood drained from his face and he lifted his eyes to the cattle feeding across the flats—bony, wispy-legged creatures that had cheated death by so scant a margin. They were weak, shaky, unready for the trail. To these men, those cattle were only a means toward quick, unholy profits. They would take the credit and probably the money paid for them. Suddenly the Kid was hungry for the sight of the Old Man's joy at sight of them.

"Take that money off that pony, Solo," he said, softly. "You an' Lefty are ridin' your own brute. An' the cattle are stayin' right where they are."

"What?" thundered Solo. "Maybe I didn't hear you right, Kid."

"You heard me, feller."

"He's coyotein' on us, Solo!" From Lefty. "We lettin' him get away with that after all we done?"

Solo didn't answer him. "How far you willin' to go to back that up, Kid?"

"All the way, Solo." Billy felt cold all over, but he was relaxed and there was no crawling in his stomach. Somehow he knew then there never would be again.

Solo said, "Too bad, Kid. Too damn bad." And his hand was blurring as it dropped to the holster.

IT SEEMED to Billy that life stood still as he viewed the making of death. He had no sensation of matching the outlaw's lethal move until gunfire kicked up a detonating crash that swelled like a wave across the flats. Solo cried out faintly, reeled and fell. Lefty, immersed in the blood lust of the moment, charged at Billy with his gun spitting.

A streak of fire ran along the Kid's side, half turning him. He aimed with terrible deliberation, his shot taking Lefty in the middle. The man stopped, weaving in his tracks. He tried to speak, but no words came. He fell. Billy fired once more, because Solo had raised to one elbow and was trying to target him. Then it was all over.

Long after the echoes had died, the Kid stood looking down upon his work. It made him a little sick. In death those

two looked so flat, so lacking in menace, he wondered how he could ever have been frightened by them. He was reloading his gun when he heard the yell and saw the two riders.

The Old Man rode in the lead, a brave figure, straight, lean, gaunt from the rigors of winter. But he stirred no emotion in Billy Bemus, for the Kid was looking at the rider who followed Truman Orp. For all the wide hat, furred coat and awkward overboots, he recognized Sally; and felt a touch of panic. Sally was the Old Man's wife.

The cowman made a running dismount to take the Kid by the arm.

"Billy!" His voice was husky with emotion. "You all right? We heard shootin' an' come—Gawd!" His eyes had gone to the dead men. "Lefty Poole an' Solo McCune. Why Kid—Sally—he—"

His words got all cluttered up and he paused as Sally came hurling herself across the interval to throw her arms about the Kid's neck, kissing him. Embarrassed and nervous, Billy tried to disengage her arms. What man would stand for his wife embracing an old flame. Not Truman Orp. "Don't, Sally," he begged.

"Billy—you darling," she murmured, clinging. "I knew you wouldn't let me down. I knew you'd keep your word and win my bet."

"Bet—?"

"That night in Red Coulee, Billy. Mister Orp told me all about his trouble with you and we put up a job on you. I bet him if he put you back to work, you'd make a loyal hand and stick to your job. He bet you'd leave your job and keep riding down to see me. You stuck it out through this awful winter, Billy, and I'm —I'm so terribly proud of you. The Chinaman couldn't get in to Red Coulee and I worked all winter. So now you and me—we can—"

Billy suddenly had her by both arms, holding her from him. "You—you mean you an' the Old Man ain't married?"

"Married? Don't be silly, Billy. I got your message from the barn man and—I've waited."

Truman Orp came back from the rein tied ponies, the heavy saddlebags over his arm. "'Tain't my fault I'm not married to her, Kid. She wouldn't have me, claimin' she loved a better man. I bet she was wrong, an' lost. An' how I lost, son. Sally, he not only done what I put him here to do, but he's just downed two of the worst men on this range an' recovered the ten thousand dollars I lost in that robbery last November. An' just look at that—" his hand swept toward the feeding cattle on the Flats. "Look at that beef! Alive! A miracle!"

Tears rolled down his weathered cheeks as he looked at those pitiful skeletons feeding on the dead grass. For a long time the three of them stared, Billy numb with a great new joy as he held Sally.

Finally Truman Orp turned his eyes to Billy Bemus again. His voice was choked.

"Don't know how you done it, Kid, an' I reckon you won't find no joy in relivin' it. Anyway, here in these bags is all I need to start again. Out there grazes the start of your brand you been makin' your brags to Sally about. Was we to lump 'em together, I reckon we'd soon be the biggest an' best outfit in Montana. Can you see it, son?"

Billy cast a look at Sally. She was smiling through her tears, nodding. The Kid found the big, hard hand of Truman Orp, the same hand that had punished him on the street of Red Coulee.

"I—I can't see it, but it's a go, boss," he gulped. "Can't see nothin' for this fool waterin' of my eyes. Musta got 'em snow burnt."

"Me an' you both, Kid," said the Old Man, and in a he-man handshake they sealed their pact.

THE END

EPITAPH FOR A HANGNOOSE HERO

The big rider circled, swaying in the saddle.

Folks wouldn't forget that Bud Rand was a chip off the outlaw block. They wouldn't give him a chance on his poverty desert ranch. . . . But why should he let his wife and baby starve--when, by playing up to his owlhoot name, he could give them the right to live?

By JOHN G. PEARSOL

THROUGH brooding, smoldering eyes, young Bud Rand stared morosely into the desert gloom that settled down from the hills. The tall, straight, blackened stems of the yucca, with their dead seed-pods atop them, were streaks of darkness against his eyes. Inside the house he heard his wife, Susan, moving about in the kitchen, trying to get supper. Bud Rand smiled grimly, bitterly. Supper! Beans again, if any beans were left!

For weeks now, the supply of food had been growing more and more meager. Yesterday they'd finished the flour. Tonight would probably clean up the last of the beans. Tomorrow there'd be nothing.

Bud wondered if this feeling that pervaded him now, this cold thing that seemed like desperation, was what made men go to hell. What should a man do to keep his wife and baby from starving? What could a gent do to bring back the sparkle to his wife's eyes when they

were becoming dead and lifeless; when his baby boy's face was pale from lack of nourishment?

"Supper, Bud," came Susan's voice from inside.

Bud rose tiredly, went in and sat down at the table, eyed his plate of beans. Across from him was Jimmy, too sober-faced for a kid of four.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Susan watching him. She was afraid he'd say something about the beans. She was afraid he'd given up; that he'd admit he was whipped. It showed in her face that this thing, finally, after nearly five years, was getting her down.

Bud knew that he should have gone away after they had convicted his father of robbery and murder. He shouldn't have stayed here and said he'd fight it out. He'd been a fool, kidding himself into thinking that folks wouldn't hold it against him because old Dirk Rand had been a thief and a killer.

But they did hold it against him. When the drought took his cattle, he couldn't get a loan, or work, or anything to keep them going. He'd sold what cattle he could salvage to keep them in grub. And now the grub was gone. He might as well have been a criminal. He was a criminal for marrying Susan King, old Jim King's daughter.

Jim King had disowned her when they were married. Lately, he had come past and asked her to return home, and she'd refused. She'd stick. If Bud wasn't welcome, she wouldn't go. If old Jim King didn't have a job for Bud on his ranch, if he wouldn't let Bud Rand work like a man, she'd stay with him. She had made that clear to her father.

That was the kind of a girl Bud Rand had dragged down to disgrace by marrying her. That was the kind of a girl who was starving to death before his eyes. He had to do something about it. And he had to do it quick.

BUD finished his beans. He looked up at Susan. Her shadowed eyes, haunted by uncertainty, were an accusation to him now.

"Take Jimmy in the other room, Susan," he told her suddenly. "I want to talk to you."

She took the boy away, came back, puzzlement in her eyes. She tried to smile, but the cold harsh, expression on Bud's face stopped that as it was born.

"I'm through with all this!" Bud said, and waved his hand at the empty bean plates, at the barren, empty desert, where Rand cattle should have been grazing. "I'm sick of being called a no-good. I'm so sick of it I'm going to do something about it! I'm going to be what they say I am."

Susan stood there like a pale-faced statue, staring at him. Finally she smiled.

"No you're not, Bud," she said. "I know you. You're square. You're fine. You—"

"Don't kid yourself," Bud told her cruelly, icily, his heart going cold within him as he saw the hurt jump into her eyes. "I said I was sick of it! I'm through! To hell with this skimping and eating beans—watching ourselves slowly starve to death. I'm going to rob the stage tonight. Go back to Jim King, and tell him and all the rest of them that they finally drove me to it. Before you can get there with the word, I'll have the stage robbed. I'll be heading out of this country. Let 'em try and catch me!"

Susan's face was white as milk. She looked at the door of the room where Jimmy was. Her eyes were deep pools of misery. They haunted Bud. They made him want to reach out and take her in his arms and admit that this was all a lie; that he wasn't going to rob anything. He was just saying this so she'd have a place to stay and something to eat. He didn't want her to be miserable, didn't want Jimmy to be pale. Then he could leave, as

he should have left, before Jimmy was born.

"You—you don't mean that, Bud," she said finally.

He smiled crookedly. "I do mean it!" he said.

She kept on staring at him, and he wished she'd stop looking at him that way. He was afraid she'd see the lie inside of him. He was afraid she'd guess why he was saying all this.

"You know that I won't ever complain, don't you, Bud?" she asked him. "I'd stay. I don't mind beans. I wouldn't mind anything, as long—"

Bud Rand smiled that crooked smile again. "Go ahead," he said. "Finish it. As long as I stay honest. Well, I'm *not* staying honest! To hell with honesty!"

She seemed to slump there before his eyes. She sighed. "I guess that settles it, Bud," she said. "If you'll hitch up the buggy I'll drive over to father's."

Bud went out and hitched a horse to the old, dilapidated buggy. When he'd finished he led it around to the front door. Susan was there, with a couple of bags. Jimmy was beside her. Bud put the bags in the buggy. He kissed Jimmy, helped Susan up into the seat. She took up the reins.

"Goodbye, Bud," she said very softly. "I'm—I'm terribly disappointed."

Bud said nothing. He stood there at the front gate and watched her drive away. He watched the wagon grow dimmer and dimmer, then finally disappear in the early evening haze.

He went back and sat on the steps, stared out across the hills and smiled that bitter, twisted smile of his.

She was gone. Jimmy was gone. And now he would have to leave, before she realized, when the stage got through without being robbed, that he had lied; lied to save her from further misery. That lie had hurt Bud Rand more than anything that had happened in his life. . . .

THE red stain of the setting sun went out of the sky as Bud hunkered there. In spite of all the talk, in spite of his being ostracized, he and Susan had been happy, and he hated to leave. But now he had to go.

He rose slowly, went to the corral, mounted his horse and rode westward. Below him, as he topped a rise in the hills, lay the gray ribbon of road down which the stage would come; the one that he had told Susan he intended to rob. He smiled again. At least, Susan would know when it was not robbed that Bud Rand was big enough, and loved her enough, to give his family up so they wouldn't have to go hungry. She would know the lie he had told her had been for her own sake.

The dark dot of the stage danced down the trail as Bud Rand rode on. He reined in so he could watch it pass. Then he saw it stop.

Dark figures moved suddenly out of the brush beside the trail. Bud saw flashes of fire leap out of the guns that glittered in men's hands. Two figures atop the stage toppled limply down from the seat. Some forms in the trail grasped the stage horses' heads.

The mutter of hoofbeats came to Bud's ears as he sat there, completely stunned, watching the hold-up of the stagecoach he had said he was going to rob. The sickening realization of what that meant came to him. Susan would think he had told the truth. She'd never know that he had lied for her, for the kid!

Five dark forms swept toward Bud as he sat there, too amazed, too bewildered to move, stunned by the irony of this thing that had happened. Before he knew it, they were near—five riders racing toward him furiously.

The thunder of their horses' hoofs was loud in his ears. The glitter of the guns in their hands flashed in his eyes. A shot lanced out at him as they saw him. A bullet knocked him sidewise in the saddle.

He touched spurs to his mount and raced away. His horse went down as a bullet smashed into its brain.

Bud Rand felt himself hurled into the air, then fell sprawling on the ground. Bullets spurted sand up into his face. He rolled over behind a rock and whipped his guns from their holsters. They began to yammer a stuttering, stammering song into the dusk. A big man, the one in the lead of the five riders, wavered in his saddle, and a shining steel box fell from his saddle horn and lay on the ground.

The big rider circled, swaying in the saddle. The others circled with him, and Bud recognized them now. They were punchers from old Jim King's ranch, employees of Susan's father. They were Poggin, Xavier, Raine, Marler and Durkee.

"It's Bud Rand!" yelled Poggin. "Kill him!"

Bud grimaced, kept his guns hammering bullets at them. They'd have a hell of a hard time killing him, barricaded as he was behind this rock nest! He kept them away from the steel box that Poggin had dropped. With singing lead he drove them back when they tried to come forward. He felt a sickening weakness come to him as he lay there, but he still hammered shots at them, to keep them back, so he could live, so he could have a chance to prove to Susan and Jimmy that he never had intended to rob a stage.

DOWN on the road below him, now, danced some tiny dots of horsemen. Bud Rand knew them to be a posse, coming to find out why the stage hadn't arrived at Talamante. Poggin and the others saw the posse too, and they ran, faded out of sight like dark phantoms, into the swiftly falling night.

Then it was still, as their hoofbeats died down. Bud rose and stumbled over to where the steel box lay. He picked it up and shuffled off among the rocks, found a honeycomb hole in a granite wall, and shoved the box into it. He plastered the hole up with mud, smeared the dirt over the rock wall so that it looked like a great mud splash against the rock. There was no crack where the hole had been.

Stumbling, staggering, nearly falling in his weakness, he hurried out of the rock nest again. He had to get away from here. He had had to hide the money. His possession of it would have put a noose about his neck. Having told Susan he was going to rob a stage, then to be found with the money in his possession, would convict him no matter what he said. His story of running into the robbers accidently would sound like a fairy tale. Telling that the robbers were Poggin, Xavier, Raine, Marler and Durkee, wouldn't help, either. He would have to *prove* it.

Bud Rand stood there beside a rock and watched the posse spear toward him. He leaned back weakly against a granite slab and raised his hands as they came close to him.

"So it's you!" said Ben Norton, the sheriff, as the posse stopped. "Another Rand, following in the footsteps of his father!"

They gathered about him, and the contempt and hatred in their eyes made Bud smile bitterly. They didn't ask him if he had robbed the stage. They accepted it as a fact as soon as they saw him.

"There was some fightin' up here while we came along the road," the sheriff said. "Who was with you? Where's the money?"

"'I didn't rob the stage," Bud told them. "I—"

They all laughed, and Bud waited till they searched for the money, till they gave up searching and ordered him to get up on a horse. He climbed weakly into the saddle, rode in the midst of them into town, through the crowd that had gathered along the dusty street.

The yellow lights threw dancing shad-

ows out ahead of them. Folks muttered resentfully as they stared, hot-eyed, at him. A tall, big-hatted man, old Jim King, Susan's father, dismounted from a horse up near the sheriff's office. He stared at Bud, then stepped out in front of the posse, stood there in their path.

"Bud Rand," he said coldly, "you're a dirty snake. Your son, Jimmy, said that he'd heard you tell Susan that you were going to rob a stage tonight. He said it like any kid would, innocently, not knowing what he was doing. I rode like hell to either stop you or kill you. You've disgraced Susan enough without this."

Old Jim King stopped and stiffened, there in the middle of the street. A set, resigned expression came over his rugged face. Ben Norton pushed his horse toward the old man.

"I was too late to stop you," Jim King went on. "But I'm not too late to kill you! Damn you—"

King's hand whipped suddenly toward a gun. Ben Norton jumped his horse forward into the old man and upset him, and old Jim King fired a wild shot into the air.

"Let the law hang him, Jim," Norton said soothingly, as he took King's gun away from him. "We've got him. He said he'd rob the stage. We found him there, wounded. There were some men with him, and they either took the money, or Bud Rand hid it. It's open and shut, Jim. Don't make it worse by taking the law into your own hands. We'll convict him, sure as fate!"

BUD RAND sat on the prisoner's bench and listened to old Jim King's testimony about what Jimmy had heard: how Bud had told Susan he was going to rob a stage. Susan didn't come to the trial. But Poggin and the other robbers were there, ranged along the wall at the back of the room. They didn't know whether Bud had recognized them or not, but they were ready to kill him if he started to talk. Bud could see that in their eyes. They were tense, watchful, ready to shoot and run.

Bud didn't talk. It would have been silly to talk. Even if Poggin and the others had not been there, ready to fill him full of lead, the truth would have sounded ridiculous. It would have made the jury laugh, coming from a man who had said he was going to rob the stage.

Then the jury went out and came back. "Guilty," was their verdict.

Everybody looked satisfied when they said that. The judge pronounced that Bud Rand should hang by the neck till he was dead, on the morning of the twentieth of June. Then they took him back to a cell and he stood at the barred window and watched the wagons and buggies and horses leaving town again.

He wondered if Susan would believe him if he told her the truth. Now, he guessed, that was about all that mattered. There didn't seem to be much hope of proving that he was innocent. So the next best thing would be to have Susan believe that he was. If she believed him she could tell Jimmy, and it would make it easier for them when folks spoke of Bud Rand as a dirty murdering skunk.

Bud called down the jail corridor. Ben Norton came to the cell door and looked distastefully in at him.

"I'd like to see my wife," Bud told him. "Will you send somebody out to get her?"

Norton sneered. "Maybe she doesn't want to see you," he said. "If she had she'd have come in to the trial."

"They usually ask a gent if there's anything he wants done or wants to say before they hang him," Bud said patiently. "So get her now and leave that ceremony off when the time comes."

Norton made a resigned sort of face, went away, and Bud hunkered down on the cot. His wound was still sore. He was still weak. His legs were shaky. His face

was pale, and his eyes were sunken, red-rimmed. He waited impatiently, rose up off the cot every once in a while, looked down the street to see if Susan was coming into town.

The sun sank down behind the hills and dusk crept over the town. Bud still stood before the barred window of his cell and strained his smarting eyes out into the darkness. Would Susan never come? Would she refuse to give him a chance to talk to her?

Then it was too dark to see, and Bud hunkered down on the cot. The yellow glow of the oil lamp in the office at the end of the corridor filtered into his cell. The sharp click of tiny heels brought him erect. He rose, went to the door and grasped the cold steel bars, as he watched Susan coming toward him. Norton was behind her, but he turned and went back when he saw Susan stop at the door of Bud's cell.

FOR a whole minute they stared at each other, and said nothing. Then she came and placed her hands over his as he gripped the bars.

"You sent for me, Bud?" she asked softly.

Bud nodded, wondered what she'd say when he told her. Would she laugh? Would she call him a liar?

"I lied to you, Susan," he told her. "I never intended to rob the stage. I told you that so you'd go to your father, so you and Jimmy would have a decent place to stay and decent food to eat. Then I was going to leave and you'd know why I lied."

He stopped and watched her eyes. But there was nothing in them. They were wide open, watchful.

"I didn't rob the stage," he went on. "I saw it robbed. I know who robbed it. But I knew I'd be laughed at if I said that. I fought them, got the money and hid it. I hoped that I'd be able to get out of here and trap the real robbers and killers, somehow. But I was worried about you. You and Jimmy. I didn't want you to believe all this. If I can't prove I'm innocent I want you to know, anyway, that I am. I want Jimmy to know it."

For some reason Bud Rand was breathless as he finished. His heart was pounding hard in his breast. He stared at Susan's eyes, waited for something she would say, some change of expression in her face, in her eyes, to tell him if she believed him.

Then she smiled. Suddenly her eyes were misty, starry, beautiful things to Bud. Her fingers tightened, fiercely, about his hands on the cell door bars.

"Thank God that's true!" she said very softly, like a prayerful whisper of relief.

She pressed up close to the bars, excitement in her eyes. "I'll get you out," she whispered. "Tomorrow night I'll bring you a gun. Then you can get away, can trap the real robbers."

The heavy stomp of Sheriff Norton's boot heels coming down the corridor stopped her. She stepped back from the door, moved to meet him and walked beside him out of sight down the corridor.

Bud stood there, his hands gripping the bars. A smile was on his lips. A light of happiness glowed in his eyes. She believed him, implicitly, without a question! It was fanciful, this story he told, but to her it was a fact as soon as he uttered it.

Bud lay down on his cot, but he couldn't sleep. He rose and paced soundlessly, back and forth, across his cell. Tomorrow night she'd bring him a gun. Tomorrow night he'd be free; and he knew that Poggin and the other robbers would be on his trail the moment he was free. They'd try to catch him, to make him tell where he'd hidden their loot. Then he might trap them. It was a chance, a gamble.

A sharp sound at the window halted Bud's pacing. He stared at an object that dangled inside the window, attached to a string. He went to it, looked out the win-

dow, saw nothing, no movement, on the deserted street.

He pulled on the string, felt a weight attached to it, pulled a gun up to the window edge and grasped it. He frowned as he handled it. Susan had said she would bring him a gun tomorrow night. Had she managed to get one tonight, and brought it to him? Had Susan attached this gun to the string?

BUD RAND put the gun behind him, stepped to the door of the cell. He called, and Ben Norton came down the corridor again, stopped and stared questioningly at him. Bud whipped the gun from behind him.

"Unlock the door, Norton!" he said coldly.

Norton looked at his eyes, at the twist of his lips. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the cell. Bud took Norton's guns, strapped them about his own waist. He locked the sheriff in the cell.

"If I live long enough," Bud said to the lawman, "I'm going to prove something to a bunch of thick-headed fools. I'm going to prove that I didn't rob the stage or kill the guard and driver!"

Norton sneered, then laughed contemptuously. "You couldn't do that if you lived a million years," he said. "And you needn't bank on it. You'll be dead before morning. There'll be a hundred men on your trail in thirty minutes."

Bud went out into the office. He took a rifle from a rack, levered it to see that it was loaded. He went into the darkened street, mounted the sheriff's horse.

Norton let out a yell inside the jail. Down the street, somebody else gave a startled yelp. A gun flamed from down there in the shadows. A bullet smashed into Bud and nearly knocked him from the saddle. He grasped desperately at the saddlehorn, clung to it grimly as he raked his horse with his spurs.

The bronc leaped forward. The gun down the street kept up its insistent yammering. More guns joined in, made a wild, chaotic clamor behind him as he raced away. He turned his head and saw them coming, saw a gun flaming at them, turning them away from his trail, somebody fighting his fight for him!

Bud frowned, puzzled, as he outdistanced the posse. He frowned as he saw five riders, sweeping along behind him, firing back at his hastily organized pursuers.

Then he figured it out. Those five riders were Poggin and his gang. They had contrived to get him the gun. They had managed his escape. They wanted him free so they could follow him, see where he had hidden the money they had stolen from the stage.

Bud raced desperately on. His head swam dizzily. A great and sickening weakness was coming over him. He had hardly the strength to stay in the saddle. His shirt was soaked with blood from his wound. But he gritted his teeth and raced on, realizing finally that he was getting away from them all. There was nobody behind him now.

He shook his head to clear it, smiled grimly. He *had* to live. He had to trap Poggin and his gang. He had to prove that he hadn't robbed a stage, so Susan and Jimmy could walk along the street with their heads up in the air. He had to live that long!

The hills danced crazily in his eyes. His horse slowed. He headed for the rock nest where he had hidden the money. He rode slowly, for if he rode fast now he would fall, and if he fell he'd never be able to rise.

He began to wonder if he would live long enough to prove anything; for he was terribly weak, terribly sick. The rock nest where he had hidden the money was just ahead of him, and he stopped. His rifle in his hands, he slid weakly from his saddle, flopped down behind a rock. He

knew Poggin and the others would come here. They would come quickly, as fast as they could. They knew the money had been hidden near here. They would guess that he would head for here.

The night was very still again. The moon was a big silver ball in the sky. It was bright, and the light of it made the night almost as clear as day. The faint throb of horses' hoofs rose up into the silence, grew in volume, swelled to a high strident sound. Five riders bobbed up suddenly before Bud Rand's eyes: racing figures, spearing like five black shadows, straight toward the rock nest.

Bud smiled grimly again. He shoved his rifle out in front of him, waited till they drew near, till they stopped and he could see them looking about, looking for him.

"Put your hands up!" Bud called. "I've got a rifle trained on you! I'll kill you if you move a finger!"

POGGIN hesitated, then raised his hands. The others followed suit and put their hands up into the air.

"Don't be a fool, Rand," Poggin called. "We drew the posse away from you. We got you out of jail. We've got the posse off on a false trail. It'll be an hour before they discover they're just chasing a bunch of wild horses down a canyon. Dig up the money and we'll split it."

Bud Rand felt himself weakening fast.

"I'll trade you," he called. "Write me a confession. Tell how you robbed the stage. Put down how you bumped into me. Tell it all, and I'll tell you where to get the money. I don't want any of it. All I want is a clean name. If you've got an hour you can get away in that time."

Poggin nodded. "It's a deal," he said.

He took his hands down, dug into his saddle pockets and got some paper. He started to write.

"Put it all down," Bud called again. "Mention all your names. Have everybody sign it. I'm going to read it before I tell where the money is. If it's not right, I don't talk. I've got nothing to lose by dying here."

Poggin didn't answer. He kept on writing. He passed the paper around among the others. They all wrote on it. Bud's eyes were swimming now. He knew he wouldn't be able to read the paper, even when he got it. He was weakening very fast. He was about done.

"Bring it to me," he called, when Poggin got the paper back again. "Lay it on the rock in front of me. Be careful!"

Poggin got off his horse and came forward. He laid the paper on the rock.

"Where's the money?" he asked.

"Go back to the others," Bud told him. "I'll read what you wrote, then I'll tell you."

Poggin went back. Bud laid down his rifle, took his pistols and placed them in front of him. He reached up and took the paper in his hand. He glanced at it, saw the string of names at the bottom. He tried to read the writing, but the light was not good enough. His vision was blurry. But he knew that Poggin wouldn't have lied in it, thinking he'd be able to read it.

He put the note in his pocket. He realized that he could never get up from where he lay. He was done. He'd die, and on him they'd find the note that would clear his reputation, that would let Susan and Jimmy be proud of their names. All he had to do was to live until Poggin left. If he died before they went away they'd take the paper with them. They'd want him to be blamed for the robbery.

"The money's in a hole in a rock," he called. "It's plastered over with mud." Then he told how to get it.

They were blurred shapes now. Poggin was moving toward the mud-plastered rock. The steel box glittered in the light of the moon as he took it in his hands. Bud's head sank lower and lower. Dimly, he saw Poggin look toward him, stand

there and stare, and Bud tried to get himself up again, so Poggin would think he was covered; so they'd hightail it away. Vaguely, Bud knew that he should do something to keep them from taking that money away. But there was nothing he could do. He'd be lucky if they didn't see that he was about done; if they didn't finish him off and take back their confession.

Poggin still stood there like a statue, staring at Bud. It was very quiet. All the others watched Poggin. Bud Rand tried to keep his eyes on them, but they were hard to see. Suddenly Poggin called out, excitedly, exultantly.

"He's about dead!" he yelled. "He can't even hold a gun! Finish him and get that paper! There's no use—"

THE wham of a gun drowned Poggin's voice. A bullet sang shrilly as it slipped off the edge of the rock behind which Bud Rand lay. The guns of the others opened up now, made the night rock with yammering, raucous sound.

Bud raised his head very slowly, tiredly. His hands were heavy as he moved them toward the guns that lay in front of him. His eyes were dull and his face was very pale as his fingers curled about the butts of the pistols. In his mind was the thought that he had to live, just an hour, till the posse came.

Bud shot once and the gun nearly jumped out of his hand. He shot again and saw Poggin stagger, fall, and drop the steel box. He tried to fire again, but he couldn't pull the hammer back.

Then the pound of hoofs rose up above the stammering clamor of shots. A posse thundered into the rocky basin. Xavier spurred his horse forward and swept up the box where Poggin had dropped it. Marler, Durkee, Xavier and Raine turned their guns on the posse as they started to race away, but the guns kept whamming their throaty sound far out into the night.

One by one, Xavier and Marler, Durkee and Raine, dropped from their saddles. Like limp sacks they lay on the ground. The growl of the guns stopped. Bud Rand reached up and pulled the paper from his vest pocket and held it tightly in his hand. He wanted them to be sure to see that.

The sound of voices was very faint in his ears. Only faintly could he see the glitter of the badge on Ben Norton's vest front. He could hear the voices, hear men talking about Poggin and the others being in with Bud Rand on the robbery. They gathered about Bud and looked down at him and seemed to marvel at the triumph in his queer smile.

Ben Norton reached down and took the paper from Bud's hand. He read it, and amazement spread over his face. He knelt down beside Bud, and in Ben Norton's eyes there seemed to be a growing realization that they'd made a hell of a lot of mistakes about Bud Rand.

Bud looked around at them and saw old Jim King in the posse, and King had just finished reading the note. He waved his hands suddenly and yelled at the men.

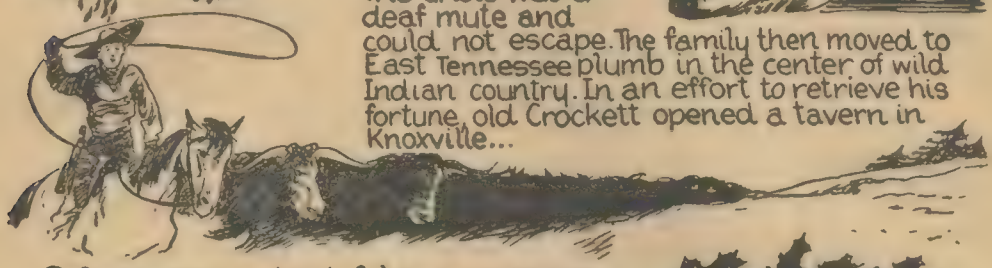
"What the hell!" he called. "Get a blanket! Get a stretcher and take this fellow to a doctor! My girl came home tonight and told me a story I said was a damn lie, and now I find out it's the truth!"

Bud Rand closed his eyes and smiled a little. He guessed that Jim was wrong, for he was going to die. Bud's eyes stayed closed, and when he opened them again he was in bed and a girl was sitting there beside him; a girl whose eyes were bright with the light of faith; a girl who didn't give a damn about a diet of beans; a girl who didn't care about anything as long as Bud Rand was straight. It was Susan, and she told him that he wasn't going to die. She wouldn't let him die. And he didn't. . . .

COWBOYS

COL. DAVID CROCKETT

❶ On August 17, 1786, a fighting son was born to the fighting Crockett family of Maryland. The lad, David, was fiery and quick tempered... His father, a revolutionary war veteran, was impoverished by the purchase of Davy's uncle from Indians who had held him captive for 18 years. The uncle was a deaf mute and could not escape. The family then moved to East Tennessee plumb in the center of wild Indian country. In an effort to retrieve his fortune, old Crockett opened a tavern in Knoxville...



❷ One evening, Jacob Siler, a wagoner, ambled into the tavern. Taken by David's expert handling of his tired horses, he offered him a job driving cattle. Davy eagerly accepted. The next morning the twelve year old lad was expertly pointing a considerable herd down the trail all by himself. A month later he returned home to go to school. Book learning, however, proved troublesome to the young cowpuncher, for after four days of it, he got into a fight with one of the older boys. From then on he played hookey. For a year he worked off a debt for his father. After a frustrated love affair he married another girl, and in 1809, with two children, moved across the mountains to Franklin county.

❸ In 1813, the Creek Indians, secretly aided by the British and Spanish, swept down upon Fort Mimms and massacred the garrison to a man.... It was war!

Hardy backwoods volunteers poured into Winchester. Despite his wife's protests, Crockett was second to step forward and sign up. He rode under Jackson as a scout in the long war that followed.....

WHO MADE HISTORY

4 As an Indian fighter, Crockett was unexcelled. His reputation swept along the frontier like prairie fire When his first wife died, he remarried and moved to Laurens county, Western Tennessee a wild lawless section. But the honest folk wanted peace and security, so they elected Crockett magistrate. There was only one drawback; they had neglected to supply him with any laws. Undaunted, Crockett improvised his own, and with "six-gun" justice kept peace in Laurens. He even got more book-learning, so he could keep records. He gained such renown and popularity for his sagacity, that he was elected colonel of the army and sent to the Legislature, where he roared backwoods invectives at the pompous debaters.

5 Financial ruin caused him to move westward beyond the frontier .....Once, during the cold, hard winter, his gunpowder gave out. The family was faced with a shortage of meat. Alone he trudged the snows; and, wading across a river, he emerged, encased in ice, to find a bear descending on him. He whipped out his knife. A terrible fight followed, and Davy staggered home, torn and bleeding, lugging a dead bear. He returned to politics. Bar-side speeches that were loudly delivered between drinks elected him to Congress. He was at last defeated by Jackson.

6 Adventure lured him, and one day, pursued by Mexican soldiers, he rode into the Alamo, where he had a rendezvous with fate ... The garrison had only 150 men, but they were Texans, sworn to fight till they were dead..On March 5, 1863, Santa Ana with several thousand men stormed the Alamo. History was gloriously written that day with the blood of those men. When the battle was over, only six Texans were taken alive. Davy was among them. They were brought before Santa Ana. The General's lip curled in a sneer..."You know what to do with them", he snapped. Crockett lunged at Santa Ana, but dropped with a dozen bayonets in his body...

FEUD OF THE WILDERNESS KINGS

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Keko's fangs were sinking . . . sinking!

Down from the trackless hills to westward ventured Tal, the wild stallion chieftain that acknowledged no master. . . . And Keko, king in his own right, heard the bugled challenge--to a duel to death for the frozen domain that lies under the northern lights!

KEKO, the king wolf, paused at the meadow flat to allow his four wabbling young whelps to catch up with him. They were handsome youngsters—four of the season's brood of six. Today, the other two were with their mother, Iskwa, Keko's golden collie mate.

The time had come to commence the training of the young, and down on the creek flats Keko hoped to instruct the whelps in the art of stalking some small prey—perhaps a muskrat or some unsuspecting beaver young. This succulent meat would be tender enough for their young fangs to worry.

Keko took a turn about the brood, sniffing hard in all quarters, making sure that no danger menaced the whelps.

Dangers there were aplenty. Even with his every sense alert, Keko knew that there might be some swift-footed creature lurking in a nearby thicket, or, overhead, the big, silent winged ones—Yeepek, the bald eagle, or Ah-hoo, the great horned owl.

Satisfied that all was well, Keko whimpered softly and commenced to glide, snake-like, toward the broad mud flat of the creek.

A young dog-whelp, nearest to his father, lost balance as he attempted to emulate Keko's belly-down crouch; but he persisted until at last he snaked ludicrously along in the king wolf's tracks.

Suddenly Keko froze, his tail stiffening straight out behind him, then waving ever so gently.

The whelps flattened, their sharp little ears pricked forward. . . . They watched their sire move stealthily forward. Then his great form catapulted through space. Came a sharp squeal from the mud flat, and in a flash, Keko was returning with a half-grown beaver in his jaws.

Keko pawed his brood back. They must be taught that the wise ones do not always begin a feast at the site of the kill, at least not until the zone has been scouted.

He whimpered a throat sound which the whelps understood. With the limp beaver shape in his jaws, he started off toward the long draw which led to the lair zone. Somewhere along the draw, in a wild fruit thicket, he would drop the kill and cut it up for his brood to worry and suck.

Tumbling over windfalls, falling into badger holes, the awkward young ones at last drew up at the spot Keko had selected for their feast. He had already ripped up the beaver and now, tongue lolling, eyes glowing pridefully, he bellied down to watch the ravenous brood go to work.

But they were not destined to enjoy their feast. Keko suddenly whirled to his feet, flinging up his huge head.

From the west, there had come a call—a distress call—from Iskwa, the golden one.

QUICKLY, Keko rounded up his brood. He was obliged to punch one of the whelps away from a piece of beaver flesh to which he clung with grim tenacity. The little one snapped at him, but Keko seized him in his jaws and started off toward the lair.

With the whelps safely cached in the cave, Keko streaked back along the draw. Iskwa was in distress and now, on a freshening breeze, came a scent which identified her enemy.

It was the scent of Tal, the wild stallion chieftain: Tal, the magnificent, who, for the first time in more than three years had ventured back to his old range on these flats. Tal had returned from the hills to westward.

Keko was plainly agitated, fully cognizant of the danger which menaced Iskwa and the other two whelps. He had had some experience with the battering hoofs of the king of the wild horse band.

Now a long savage scream, a wildly bugled sound, shattered the silence of the hinterland—the defiant cry of Tal.

Ahead, Keko glimpsed something that sent the blood racing through his veins.

That something was the crawling shape of Iskwa. With the limp shape of a whelp in her jaws, she was wallowing in the long grass, attempting to crawl back toward her lair.

The battering hoofs of the silver gray stallion king had done some grievous harm.

Keko almost froze in his tracks as he caught the thump of heavy hoofs. There, on the far bank of the shallow draw, his head tossing savagely on a handsomely arched neck, was Tal—Tal, the killer.

As the stallion shrilled out another defiant call, Keko hurled himself to Iskwa's side.

Softly through a light thicket, a shaggy little wild mare was nudging along a gangling, few-days-old foal—a young creature which Iskwa and her whelps must have menaced.

Keko was flushed with the urge to leap to attack, but instead, he dropped beside the gasping form of his mate from whose jaws had fallen the limp dead shape of her whelp. . . .

IT WAS thus that the main creature glimpsed Keko and his mate. Attracted by the shrill calls of Tal, he had stolen softly along the draw. He was Dan Martin, who had raised Keko and the golden one from puppyhood and whelphood to maturity; with his wife, Betty, he had watched the curiously mated animals' romance and their struggles against famine, fire and multifarious enemies.

At the call of Tal, the wild one, Dan had left his work. Once, before he had captured Keko, he had known Tal. Tal had been the chief reason for Dan's early establishment as a homesteader in this hinterland zone. He'd had visions of the capture of Tal, the stallion king; had even purchased a blooded filly with the hope that he could begin a horse spread from a mating between Tal and the filly.

Other white men—and occasional Indians, too—had covetously attempted to trap Tal, but never had they come anywhere near success. It was because of the settlement of Martin in this range, that Tal had moved to the higher hills with his small band of shaggy wild mares.

Now, after almost four years of absence, he was back—bigger and handsomer than before, a king creature which feared neither grizzly nor wolf pack.

But there was an enemy which Tal did dread; not so much in fear for himself, but for his mares and their progeny. That enemy was Acheeta, the cougar, and his kindred.

"Lions must have got thick again in the hills," Martin told himself. "That's the reason Tal's back. He's brought his mares down for the foaling."

Again there surged through the man that old obsession—the desire for the capture of the silver-gray one. But now he was attracted by the movement of Keko and the golden one.

He winced as he saw the stretched-out form of the dead whelp, toward which Iskwa struggled, in spite of Keko's attempts to get her headed toward the lair. That limp shape, and the other one beyond the thicket, and the helplessly dragging hindquarters of Iskwa testified to the power and speed of Tal's four hoofs.

Dan turned to observe the stallion. He fingered the trigger of his Savage. By rights, this was the range of Keko and his kin. One shot would forever dispose of Tal as a menace.

But the stallion was posed like a magnificent piece of statuary, flaunting his majesty.

Dan lowered his rifle. . . . A feud of wilderness kings had been declared. He must leave these wild ones to their own battles.

"God help you and your band if Keko ever calls in his gray pack," he intoned, still gazing at Tal. "They'll—"

He broke off. Iskwa had flopped to her belly, but Keko thrust his strong muzzle

beneath her, whimpering softly, as he urged her to drag herself along back to the lair. Both made strangely piteous throat sounds.

Dan swallowed hard. He had learned a lot about loyalty, faithfulness and devotion from these wild creatures. Softly, he withdrew, but as he turned, a fickle changing wind wafted his scent to Tal.

With a prodigious snort which sent his mares crashing through the undergrowth, the big stallion reared and pivoted, then went bounding to cover. Of all creatures in the hinterland, he feared man most. . . .

As Dan neared his cabin, his mind still troubled with that old desire for Tal, he came to a sudden halt. The long penetrating call of Keko had blasted the silence.

On a rise of land in front of his lair, the king wolf thrust his muzzle skyward, to pour out one challenging call after another. It was a warning to Tal that this was his, Keko's, range. It was also the declaration of a feud.

Curled in her den, Iskwa sought sleep and surcease from the throbbing ache in her battered body—while outdoors, alert and ready to fight to the death in defense of his kindred, Keko took up his vigil.

THROUGHOUT the summer, Iskwa wasted to a gaunt shape. Her whelps exacted a heavy toll of her strength, and it was not until the early days of autumn that Keko was able to take the young from the den and put them on a strictly meat diet.

Now, in his wisdom, Keko realized that his mate required exercise. It wouldn't be long before winter set in, and if it was to bring heavy snows, Iskwa would need to be in shape for many a long run.

Keko forced her from her cave and for three weeks or more persisted in his efforts to make her exercise. He was rewarded at last. Now her hindquarters no longer buckled and flopped as she attempted to run.

She had been well fed. Keko, himself, had run the whelps off to start hunting for themselves, but not yet had he and Iskwa completely cut the young brood off.

Today, with a fresh wind ruffing up his new coat, the king wolf chopped exultantly to a rise of land, there to pour out his ringing call—a call which penetrated far to westward, where Tal, the wild one, grazed with his band.

"Oh-h-h-h-h—Ou-u-u-u-u-u—"

Suddenly Keko peeled back his lips in a fierce grimace of hatred, for on the breeze there came the screaming call of Tal—a call which declared the stallion's acceptance of Keko's challenge. . . .

From the lake and creek now came the raucous gabble of migratory geese and ducks. Already the trumpeter swans had gone winging southward.

Iskwa's coat was beginning to take on its normal, beautiful winter sheen of gold and white. She was growing stronger with each day. Whenever her young ventured back to their lair zone, she was able to romp with them.

Today the brood was off to westward, alone.

Keko lay preening himself, plucking burrs and pieces of raspberry cane from his coat and paws. Both he and Iskwa had been well fed today. The golden one stretched luxuriously out on the flat slab rock before the cave mouth.

Scarcely had Keko begun to blink in a doze in the warmth of the lowering sun, when he suddenly came wide awake. He sprang alertly to all fours.

Out of the northwest a stiff breeze brought a hiss of snow. It had immediate effect on the water birds. From the far lake came that long warning cry of Moakwa, the loon: "Ou-u-u-u—Ahh-h-h-h—Ha—Ha-a-a!" Ganders honked and a large flight of geese took wing with a deafening gabble of sound.

But above this sound, the wild bugle of Tal reached Keko's sharp hearing.

Instantly the king wolf made a throaty signal to his mate. He catapulted through space. His young ones were up along the draw, in the direction from which Tal's savage call had come.

With a short snarl, Iskwa leaped out, to stretch along in her mate's tracks.

KEKO came to a sudden skidding halt as a mad threshing of battering hoofs arrested him. Tal was in action just beyond a chokecherry thicket. His screams were deathly.

Iskwa whimpered as she fetched up, but Keko struck her sharply on a shoulder with his closed jaws. His nose was wrinkled, as he sniffed back and forth. There was an alien scent mingling with that of Tal and the young wolves. There was also the scent of death—of a dead colt.

Tal, the stallion king, knew of that kill. Keko now glimpsed him rearing to his full height—a fierce, majestic creature, whose eyes expressed his great passion.

Then suddenly a deep-throated growl sounded from the shadows. Keko's hackles bristled. It was the throat sound of Mukwa, the grizzly.

Came the sudden smashing barrage of Tal's hoofs; a snarl from Mukwa, who amazingly rolled out of range; and then a sudden flurry of hurtling bodies as both the big ones wheeled to action.

Softly Keko began to circle the grim site. He was snaking around to get at his whelps.

Now he glimpsed the quartette. They were belly down just beyond the limp shape of the dead colt. Keko made a sound which only they could hear above the screams of the stallion and the *woofs* and snarls of the grizzly.

But one of the whelps, the biggest dog, paid no heed to Keko's signal. He was flushed with the urge to sink his fangs into that inviting colt flesh. He was almost at the carcass when old Mukwa heard.

With speed that quite belied his seven hundred pounds of bulk, Mukwa wheeled and struck. At the same instant Iskwa hurtled forward in a magnificent leap, but the great tusks of Mukwa had done their evil work. He reared up from the weakly kicking whelp and flailed a lightning forepaw attack on Iskwa. A single blow could have smashed her skull to a pulpy mass, had she not flirted her body off to one side. As it was, the tips of Mukwa's long claws raked her shoulder. Blood spurted.

Iskwa flopped and rolled. Mukwa *woofed* fiercely and rushed. And like a streak, Keko catapulted forward. His fangs slashed the big silver-tips lips, ripping out sidewise, as Keko hurled himself on out of range of those battering forepaws.

Keko whimpered a call to Iskwa. He was forcing her and the young ones off. Tail low, the golden one reluctantly backed off, whining to her three remaining whelps.

BEYOND, his well-muscled chest splashed with blood, Tal stood defiantly belligerent, ready in an instant to rear and strike, or to swap ends and batter with his smashing hind hoofs.

Alone, there was little chance that Keko could cope with the silver-tip. He was obliged to half turn, for Iskwa had halted, and there was imminent danger of Tal attacking her and the young ones. Iskwa was flushed with a fierce reluctance to move off.

Dusk was swiftly sifting its grays down on the hinterland, and sharp needles of snow were beginning to drive through the hair and fur of the animals.

Keko snuffled snow from his nose, as craftily he backed the old silver-tip toward the stallion. Then suddenly he sprang, leaping skilfully inside those massive, flailing paws.

His fangs struck a throat hold and held.

Mukwa threshed about, doing every-

thing possible to shake loose that clinging shape. But Keko's fangs were sinking . . . sinking! The gods of battle might have favored him now had not Tal reared suddenly and screamed.

The wild stallion was smashing through the light scrub. He was making for Iskwa and the whelps, when Keko leaped clear and flung himself in on his hind parts.

Iskwa had wheeled. She was bunched to leap, when Keko struck from the rear. With a mad scream of pain, Tal swapped ends and let fly his hind hoofs, but Keko was not to be caught.

Stalemated, Tal stood quivering in his passionate anger. One of his kindred had been killed. It didn't matter to him that the wolf creatures were not responsible for the killing. They were his enemies.

For a long moment, Keko crouched, snarling. Tal stood quivering, ready in an instant to strike. But from the colt carcass, there came the sound of slabbering tusks. Mukwa was at work, ripping and tearing, gulping the succulent meat.

With a snort of rage, Tal whipped around and went crashing back to attack.

Keko joined his mate and the whelps, and together they streaked on back to their lair, leaving the two big ones to the conclusion of their drama.

At the lair, with Iskwa and the young safely housed, he chopped off to a rise of land and stretched his neck. He could hear the sounds of battle distinctly—Tal's screams and Mukwa's blasting *woofs* and hideous snarls.

Then, from the far west, came the long high-pitched call of Rak, son of Keko. Keko hoisted his muzzle and poured back an answering call. Rak would know that this was no distress signal. He would know better than to venture down to the lower range, unless Keko, his father, called him to come in with the pack. . . .

A long shrill bugle came downwind from Tal—a call which carried back to the cabin of the man creatures. . . . Dan Martin looked up sharply at his wife.

"Trouble up along the draw, honey," he said softly. "That's Tal again. He's in trouble with a silver-tip." His voice was strangely vibrant, and Betty winced.

"You still want him, don't you, Dan dear?" she said.

There was no reply, but Betty understood. She knew that Dan was patiently planning, hoping that heavy snows would force Tal and the wild band to a boldness in their search for fodder.

A soft smile toyed with Dan's mouth. He had formulated a plan for Tal's capture; had already picked out the site of a trap. All he needed now was about three feet of snow, enough to render grass rustling almost a physical impossibility for Tal and his kindred.

Dan had plenty of hay. It was fragrant with the tang of wild mint. He knew what to do with a load of it, when the proper time came. . . .

ALL was grimly desolate and silent in the range of Keko now. Days of steady snow and tight weather had brought about a mysterious exodus of wild life. Even the elk herds had vanished.

The three whelps of Keko's brood had been led off into the far timber zone. And now Iskwa and Keko were alone, fiercely hungry. Iskwa was irritable. Many times she snapped at Keko, urging him to track down and attack the wild band of Tal.

Keko tracked down the band, but he made no attempt to attack. He was content merely to watch the stallion and his mares and progeny at their efforts to obtain forage. He paid special attention to the young colts and fillies. They were scarcely able to cope with this condition of heavy snow, which necessitated pawing down two or three feet before reaching the dried meadow grasses. . . .

Today another set of eyes watched the wild one—the eyes of the man creature. Iskwa whimpered as she glimpsed Mar-

tin's form on the edge of a willow thicket. But Keko wheeled and struck her sharply on the shoulder.

He turned, to watch Martin, but suddenly Tal snorted. He had caught the man scent. He called shrilly to his band; then, rearing high, he whirled and bounded off to cover.

Keko watched the man withdraw into the shadows. A low throat sound escaped the king wolf. He licked his chops and turned, to sniff into the breeze stirring from eastward.

In another moment he was bounding forward, Iskwa stretching along in his tracks.

But their long hunt was fruitless. Keko came to a halt, his sides bellowing. He and the golden one had covered a wide radius, but no sign of track or scent had they picked up.

Soon, very soon, the patience of Keko must break. He would be forced to steal in on the wild band of Tal. But that would be a dangerous venture, for Iskwa, although a great fighter, was not equipped to give battle to one so great as Tal.

Of course, there was always the gray wolf pack, under the leadership of Rak. But to call in the pack meant they would be forced to share the kill.

As night closed in, and the tamaracks in the muskeg reverberated sharply under the pressure of the fierce frost, Keko touched his mate lightly in a flank. Together, hungry and spent, they trotted on back to their lair—there to sleep, while the relentless sub-zero night held sway.

For the next two weeks it required all Keko's skill to hunt and provide sufficient food for him and Iskwa. There had been no opportunity to strike at the band of Tal, for the man creature seemed ever on the watch, and although this man had never done any harm to Keko or his mate, there was always that inherent dread of man in the kings wolf's mind.

Iskwa, of full domestic dog blood, held no such qualms. More than once, in the torture of her great hunger, she ventured close to the corrals of the man, where she licked her chops expectantly.

But the creatures belonging to the man were well housed. Iskwa slunk back to her mate, to the den. There for two full days and nights they were shut in by merciless blizzards.

As Keko lay curled near the entrance to the cave, he pricked up his ears whenever he caught the wild shrill bugling calls of Tal. . . . Maybe, in time, one or more of the wild one's young colts would drop from exhaustion.

TODAY, as Keko emerged from the almost snowed-in lair, the sun was making a sickly pale yellow effort to push through forbidding gray clouds.

Keko whimpered to his mate, and together they struck off to eastward, where they made their first kill in many days. Keko had picked up the scent of a wasted old cross-fox that was busy hunting at the muskrat lodges.

Working in a relayed attack, Keko and the golden one quickly brought the fox to bay. It was the work of but a moment for Keko to strike and crush the fox brisket with his fangs, but the wilderness starvling had little meat on his bones—hard stringy stuff which did little more than whet appetites for more.

Until dusk, Keko led his mate in a fruitless raid on the muskrat houses. Both became irritable, snapping at one another from time to time.

But now the king wolf became suddenly alert. He chopped stiffly forward to a knoll and then hoisted his muzzle into a shifting wind. With scarcely a signal to Iskwa, he stretched into a bounding lope, making for the creek bed.

The sky cleared as night settled over the wilderness. Myriads of stars danced and scintillated in a deep velvet sky.

At last Keko brought his mate to a halt.

A strange, unaccountable silence gripped the wilds. It registered in Keko's consciousness as he stood on a hummock, a magnificently posed creature, head cocked, tongue lolling, and his right forepaw tucked up.

Into the sky main there shuddered a pale, mysterious wraith of greenish-yellow light, a wisp which, in a flash, was gone again.

Keko's ears began to prick back and forth. They were attuned to a familiar sound. He was listening to the movement of hoofs, at a dense glade of cottonwoods, just beyond the meadow's edge.

A sudden burst of sky light brought a soft whimper from the king wolf. Iskwa crowded to his side, as a flurry of multi-tinted lights shuddered in writhing formation across the Milky Way.

Then with a burst that seemed to split the empty sky apart, the northern lights broke in all their terrible beauty, to spill earthward in a mad cascade of brilliance.

From the cottonwoods came a deep snort—a horse sound.

Keko half turned, to glimpse the strong form of Tal stealing into the timber. From that timber came a tang of wild mint—strange for this time of the year. It came from a mound of fresh hay. Keko had watched the man creature plant the hay there, and now it was attracting the starving Tal. The wild one was making soft throaty sounds.

Keko and Iskwa stole silently on, using folds of land to hide their shadows.

Satisfied that he was sufficiently close in, Keko flopped to his belly. He quivered as he watched Tal fling high his head and shake it, as though in protest. There was something wrong about this hay mound, and yet Tal's great consuming hunger was nullifying his customary good judgment. Not for days had he and his band rustled enough forage for one good meal apiece—and here, for the taking, was an abundance of sweet fragrant hay.

Keko's spine rippled. He could see the horizontal poles which formed the trap constructed by the man creature.

Now the mares began to grow impatient. They began to muzzle Tal, pushing him forward. He suddenly whirled and bit one of his consorts sharply in her shoulder.

His eyes glowed flaming red as they reflected his passion in the teeming lights. Now he turned. His neck was stretching forward and down. He was moving in.

Came a sudden crash, a wild scream, a lunge of Tal's big form as he hurtled hard against the sides of the pole trap. He had sprung the ingenious mechanism which had dropped a pole gate behind him. For the first time in his life, Tal, the great one, was a captive.

At the sound of the crash, the shaggy mares and their weakling young had bounded off, stampeding in all directions.

Tal stood quivering, alone, spotlighted by those bewildering cascades of lights.

All at once he picked up the wolf scent. With a snort of rage, he hurled himself against the poles. He lashed out fiercely with his forehoofs. Then, swapping ends, he battered the unyielding walls of the trap with a drumming barrage from his hind hoofs, screaming his rage with a savagery which caused Iskwa to cower down, fearfully.

Keko stirred himself. He whipped suddenly to one side with a short, barely audible gasp. At his back, there was another sound—the sound of a door slamming.

BACK at his cabin, Dan Martin had heard the commotion. He chuckled softly, for he had not told Betty about the pole trap he had built.

They hurried from the house together. From the loud screams of the stallion, Betty realized what had happened. Dan set a furious pace along the creek, a pace which Betty had trouble in keeping up

with. Breathing was difficult in the frosty atmosphere.

It was the sight of Keko's and Iskwa's slinking forms which brought the man to a sudden halt. The king wolf and his mate were crossing the creek. From the meadowland, there came the plaintive call of a mare—a call which brought Tal rearing up to his full height.

Betty Martin joined her husband and laid a hand on his arm. "Dan, dear, don't you see what you've done?" she breathed. Her voice was very low, broken. "Why did you do it, Dan? Look! Tal is injured. That dark blotch on his chest. You shouldn't have done this, Dan .... He—"

The sudden blasting call of Keko cut her short. It was Keko's call to the pack. The time had come to mete out judgment on Tal and his wild band for the killing of Keko's young; and for the feast.

From the distance came the long, high-pitched wail of Rak, the pack leader.

Dan frowned. He knew what this would mean. Tal a captive, his colts and mares would stand no chance against the savage assault of the gray devils.

The man turned to Betty. "God! I've got to do something quickly, honey," he gulped. "Hear those wolf calls? The pack's being drawn in for a big kill. I'm —sorry, hon. Had no idea of the consequences. But I'll free Tal. Maybe there's time yet to save the mares and colts. Please run back to the cabin and bring me the Savage."

Much as Dan wanted Tal, he realized it was unfair to hold him captive now. As Betty slipped away to the cabin, Dan moved up to the pole trap.

Tal saw him and hurricaned in, striking furiously with his hoofs, screaming his rage. The blood dripped from his body where a jagged knot had snagged him.

Dan sprang away, narrowly missing being struck as one of Tal's forehoofs broke through between two poles.

At a sound in the meadow behind him, Dan spun. He gasped as the northern lights spotlighted a grim scene—Keko and Iskwa lunging to attack a gangling young colt which they had cut out. The young one was bogging helplessly down in the deep snow.

A little mare wallowed up and struck the king wolf a glancing blow in the shoulder. But Iskwa headed her quickly off as Keko whirled, to attack the colt. He struck savagely and his fangs sank swiftly to make the kill.

Frantically the man creature turned back to the pole gate. He thrust a hand inside, in an effort to release the locking pin.

Tal saw and charged. Uttering a savage scream, the wild one struck. A sickening pain shot up to Dan's shoulder; but he had unhitched the locking mechanism, just as Tal struck.

Again the big one lunged. He smashed hard against the gate poles. He did more —he went crashing on through to freedom as the man leaped deftly to one side.

Shaking out his mane, Tal flung up his head and poured out a terrible call, a call of defiance and warning.

It was a call heard by Keko and Iskwa, now belly down at their kill, sloshing up blood and succulent colt flesh.

KEKO called to his mate, but was obliged to strike her sharply in the shoulder before she heeded his warning. She was barely clear of the colt carcass when Tal's heavy forehoofs crashed down.

Now, swiftly, the gray pack closed in from the far edge of the meadow. The little mare, mother of the slain colt, and Tal were soon ringed by a circle of blowing shapes, whose tongues lolled and whose eyes glittered evilly.

Keko's moment for revenge had come!

Tal stood defiant, towering above the quaking shape of the little mare at his side. Overhead the lights continued to spill their terrible brilliance earthward.

Now Keko was making whimpered signals to his pack. Though his own hunger was partly appeased, there still remained his thirst for vengeance. Tal had killed his young. Tal and his kind must pay!

He made a sudden long leap. Tal reared, but Keko got in under, and as he flashed by, his fangs struck and ripped at a tender spot on the big one's flank, dangerously close to the hamstring.

Again and again the hungry pack of wolves and hybrids—the progeny of Keko and Iskwa—flung themselves in to attack. And Tal, bleeding, magnificent, fought them off.

But his shaggy little mate was less fortunate. At a wild squeal of distress from her throat, Tal wheeled. The mare was down, with Rak and Iskwa at her throat.

Keko bunched to leap, but from across the creek there came a sudden gush of flame, attended by a savage, blasting roar. A bullet whined through space, a scant foot above Keko's head.

The king wolf whirled. Tal reared and swung, snorting wildly as he broke into a stretching lope for cover.

Shot after shot reverberated. A young dog-wolf was caught in mid-air by a random bullet. He flopped back.

Then, save for the little mare's convulsions, all sign of movement, all sound, was gone.

DAN and Betty Martin stood on the far bank of the creek. Betty had done the shooting, for Dan's wrist was too painful, even to hold the Savage.

"Shall we go now, honey?" he said huskily.

"Yes, Dan. . . . We must dress your wrist. Dan—after this, you must promise to leave Tal alone. We've got to let these wild creatures live their own lives, and let them settle their own feuds."

Dan nodded, and together they moved off from the grim site of the wilderness drama. . . .

On the far edge of the meadow, Keko licked his chops as he watched the man creatures move away.

There was no longer any sign of Tal and the wild band. Soon, very soon now, Keko would steal forward, leading the pack in to feast on those two starkly grim shapes on the meadow flat—the price Keko had exacted of Tal for the killing of his and Iskwa's young.

While off in a far thicket, his head high on his beautiful arched neck, Tal stood like a piece of heroic statuary. Still in his wild soul there surged hatred for the other feudist, Keko; but Tal had realized tonight that this range belonged to the king wolf and his kind.

As the deathly night closed in and tree boles and lakes snapped and boomed under the heaving of the frost demons, Keko at last began to slink back toward the kill. There, until his and his pack's bellies were distended fully, they would enjoy the feast, the spoils of another victory.

"In thirty days I return—to die at your hands!"

ALAN DE COURCY, ex-Crusader, who had gambled against a despot's mercy and lost, rode to Merv, the Jewel City of the Sands, to keep a strange rendezvous with death, in Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's great novelette of Genghis Khan and the Mongol Horde, "Sword For Hire."

In the same issue—

Commander Ellsberg tells of the salvage search for the treasure of the sunken *Egypt*—one hundred feet deeper than a man could dive and live; A Louis G. Goldsmith story, "A Friend in China;" the conclusion of Frank Gruber's serial, "Peace Marshal;" and other good fact and fiction pieces about the world's far corners.

The May issue is on sale at all stands April 7th

THROUGH HELL ON HORSEBACK

Woods knew that it meant to throw itself backward and crush him.

By RULAND WALTNER

JIM WOODS' hands relaxed above the smooth butts of his guns. His chair tilted against the wall, as he watched Whiskey Davis come up to the bar.

Davis had been playing poker all night,

Could a wandering, two fisted waddy and the poor brow-beaten range-stray he'd befriended carve--with a fighting man's guns, and a western youngster's loyalty-- a blind trail, through hell, to vengeance?

in the private room at the back. When he saw Woods, suspicion crept behind the blankness of his gambler's face.

Woods knew that Davis recognized him as a stranger in Jubilee and would resent his presence, until he was satisfied as to what had brought him here. But he sat, not moving, his worn, dusty boots dangling just above the floor.

Whiskey stepped past him to the bar.

"Come here, Lonesome," he called, to a boy with an empty face and a nose that twitched like a rabbit's. "You brought me luck. Drink up hearty."

He nodded to the bartender. Woods saw his eyelid drop in a brief signal, as the boy stumbled forward.

"Thanks, Whiskey," Lonesome stammered.

With detached amusement, the gambler watched his hand close on the glass.

As it rose toward his lips, the boy uttered a cry that was half a howl, set the drink down so hard that the liquid slopped on the counter.

"Darn you, Whiskey!" he shouted. "You had him put pepper in that! I smell it."

"You're always smelling things," the gambler answered. "You brought me luck—bad luck. I told you not to speak to me before a game."

"I didn't know," Lonesome moaned. "Honest, I didn't. And this'll make me sick. Lemme dance, instead. I hate to dance, too," he added hopefully.

Whiskey poured a stiff drink and sipped it, propping himself on one elbow.

"You'll dance," he promised, "after you drink."

Lonesome's nose twitched faster. Desperately, he seized the liquor and downed it at a gulp. He clung to the rail, spluttering, while the room shook with laughter.

Woods sagged lower in his chair, reminding himself that this unknown boy meant nothing to him. He could not mix in other people's troubles, until he had disposed of the affair for which he had been living all these years.

The gambler finished his drink with an expressionless face. He poured the last drops from his glass into the palm of his hand, rubbing them in, so that the smell of whiskey rose pungently among the mingled odors in the room. This almost unconscious action had given him his name.

"Now, let's see you dance," he suggested, indulgent as a cat playing with a mouse.

Lonesome stuttered, his lips moving fast in his excitement.

Negligently, Whiskey's hand slid inside his coat. It came out filled with a pearl-trimmed Colt. Lonesome leaped high in the air; but, even as he leaped, the gun spoke, and one of his boot heels bounced crazily along the floor.

Everyone laughed again, and the waxed ends of Whiskey's black mustaches lifted in a grin that showed the white gleam of his teeth.

JIM WOODS rose to his lank six feet, the dull butt of his gun in his hand. It coughed once, sharp and acrid. The shining heel of Whiskey's boot rolled after Lonesome's, its bright silver rowel tinkling against the rough boards.

"A joke's a joke," Woods said softly. "But the boy's not really funny."

Caught by surprise, Whiskey pawed for his balance before he turned on Woods angrily.

"Says who?" he demanded, his eyes hot as live coals.

Woods stared back at him, unmoving, cold gray eyes clashing with hot black ones. His worn gun was as steady as the handsome weapon Whiskey held on him.

"I've seen you before, pilgrim," the gambler said, "and I don't like your face."

"That's too bad," Woods drawled. "I ain't aiming to change it."

Whiskey's eyes had gone blank again.

He ignored, too pointedly, the gun in Woods' hand; but he could not ignore the level gaze that challenged his without fear or hesitation.

As the men about them drew back, Lonesome flung himself between them with startling agility.

"Don't shoot him, Whiskey," he begged, his rabbit mouth quivering. "He meant it kind, and I've learned my lesson. I won't never do it again."

Deliberately, Whiskey's eyes moved over him. Like a heavy hand, they seemed to finger each loose feature—the jerking Adam's apple, the narrow shoulders and incredibly thin body.

Then, as though yielding to the boy's pleading, he holstered his gun and reached for the glass the bartender had filled for him.

"It don't pay to butt into other folk's business, pilgrim," he said significantly. "We'll finish this some other time."

"Any time suits me," Woods agreed.

Lonesome plucked at his arm. "Let's get out of here," he whispered. "I've seen your face before, too. And, by golly, I like it."

OUT in the star-filled night, Woods wondered what he should do. In the saloon, the odds against Lonesome had made him help the lad. But he had not meant to annex a follower. He had to travel fast and alone, and the boy could only prove a burden. But Lonesome had adopted him as obviously as a stray dog adopts the man who feeds it.

"It's funny—you being a pilgrim," he babbled, trotting at his heels. "I don't know where, but I sure seen you plenty times before—plenty times."

Woods breath tightened, but he asked easily, "Maybe you've been in Texas?"

The boy shook his head. "I ain't never been nowheres but here," he said. "I reckon I wouldn't have remembered, if it hadn't been for Whiskey thinkin' he seen you, too. He's the hindsightedest and the foresightedest man there ever was. Seems like sometimes he can see things before they happen and just naturally read the thoughts out of your head. But you look like—you look like—"

Even in the darkness, Woods knew that Lonesome's lips quivered and his nostrils twitched.

"I got it! You look like Long Tom. But you ain't him."

Wood's pace slowed with sudden interest. "Who's Long Tom, and how do you know I'm not him?" he demanded.

Lonesome giggled. " 'Cause we buried him in Boothill, years back. Some says he committed suicide. But he wasn't that kind. If I'd knowed who done it, I'd laid for 'em sure. Long Tom came up from Texas way, too; and he was mighty good to me, just like you. If I could, I'd sure pay you both back."

Woods smiled understandingly. There was little chance of the boy's paying anyone for anything, but there was no mistaking his sincerity.

"And you never learned any more about Long Tom?" he asked, with a carelessness he did not feel. He had traveled hundreds of miles to hear just this; but he must not let Lonesome guess what his words meant to him.

The boy shuffled slower. "Nope," he said. "Nobody suspicioned nobody. We all liked Long Tom, even Whiskey. He said Tom was the finest man that ever drawed on a boot."

"So they never read trail on his murderer?"

"He was hanging on to his gun sort of funny like," Lonesome said thoughtfully. "That's why they called it suicide. But Long Tom was a fanner and wouldn't of held no gun like that. I got it here. Nobody wanted it, so I been packing it ever since. Some day, maybe I'll come up with the man that used it, and we'll see if it can shoot straight twice."

HE LIFTED the gun from its holster and passed it to Woods, who paused in the light from a neighboring window and studied it carefully.

Jim recognized the plain butt and the dull bluish barrel as being one of a brace that he had seen often enough in his boyhoods days. But Lonesome had just told him that a bullet from its blunt snout had sent Woods' father—Long Tom, from down Texas way—to a lonely grave in Boothill, and made his son a homeless orphan.

"Tom had two like it, but the other'n disappeared," Lonesome offered. "He had a kid back in Texas that he was going to send for when his ranch got going good. Sam Smith, his foreman, used to talk about doing something about it; but I reckon he never did."

No, Sam Smith nor any one else had done anything about the kid, or avenging Long Tom. But Jim Woods was old enough, now, to take the trail himself, a trail clouded over and forgotten by the years.

"Is Sam alive?" he asked.

"Sure," Lonesome answered. "He still works for the Tumbling T—only Whiskey's his boss now. It's worth a mint."

Woods glanced down at his shabby clothes, at his worn and dusty boots. The things he wore, his horse and saddle, were all he had in the world; yet his father had owned a ranch that was "worth a mint".

"I'll ride out to see Smith," he said. "If it's such a big spread, maybe I can get a job."

"I'll go, too," Lonesome offered. "I ain't got no home, nor no folks, nor nothing."

Before Woods could answer, he ran toward a thick-barreled, hammer-headed piebald that dozed at the rail, one long ear dropped forward and the other lying flat along its muscular neck.

Tophand, the bright bay horse that Woods had raised from a colt, nickered from the hitchrack and, as his master swung into the saddle, exploded like a fourth of July cracker. The fight for mastery was a game that Woods encouraged for the sheer joy of combat. But Lonesome watched them with swelling admiration. Never were horse and rider more evenly matched. Never was domination battled so gamely.

As abruptly as he had begun the battle, Tophand subsided.

"Gollies," Lonesome said fervently, "I bet you could ride a cyclone, if they put four legs under it!"

Woods grinned at him, and his teeth were dazzling in his brown face. "It'd sure be fun to try," he said, patting Tophand's wet brown neck. "When I was a kid, I used to ride them bareback. That teaches you to stick on."

"Whiskey's got a horse ain't no one ever rid," the boy said. "He's a killer and bad as they come. Don't you try to ride him, Tex. Don't you even go near him."

As they loped down the street where the dust lay fetlock deep, a figure, that had been clinging to the blacker shadows behind them, stepped boldly into the moonlight; and Whiskey Davis made his way toward the light that showed dimly behind the window of the sheriff's office.

WOODS and Lonesome did not find Sam Smith at the Tumbling T ranchhouse. The Chinese cook told them he was spending the night at a line camp by the Little Rapid River.

The stars were fading in a paling sky when the cabin, a yellow blur of lamplight showing at its one window, grew out of the shadows before them. Gray morning mists curled above the splashing waters of the Little Rapid, as they forded its shale bed. As they mounted the steep bank on the far side, Tophand picked up a stone that sent him limping.

Half sheltered from the wind by the side of the corral, Woods wedged the

shining black hoof between his knees and probed for the stone, while the bay horse nuzzled his shoulder.

"I'm emptier'n a lard can after round-up," Lonesome said fervently. "I'm going to amble up to the shack and see if Sam won't put our names in the pot, or maybe let me stir up a batch of pancakes."

Woods keen ears caught the sound of hoofbeats on the trail behind him, as the boy disappeared. He dislodged the stone from under the iron shoe, heard a horse splash into the ford and climb the bank. Hastily, he set down the hoof and straightened to his full height as a man rode toward him, a big man who slouched in a saddle that, even in the half light, showed the bulge of a carbine in its boot.

"What you doing here, feller?" the man questioned.

Woods could see his hand resting on his hip, and he knew, by its very carelessness, that it could fall with lightning swiftness to the gun holstered beneath it.

"Who's asking?" he said quietly.

"The sheriff of Hondo County."

With one hand, the man turned back the coat that covered the star on his vest; but his other remained near his gun.

"I came to see Sam Smith about a job," Woods said frankly.

"Any one with you?"

"A boy named Lonesome. He's up at the shack, rasseling grub."

"Suppose we take a look-see," the sheriff suggested. "I got a tip something was wrong up here."

"Suits me," said Woods amiably.

He turned Tophand into the corral and started for the shack, the sheriff crowding his heels.

But the boy was not inside stirring up pancakes as he had promised. He was standing on the hardpacked dirt before the door, turning a dark, blunt object in his hands. At his feet stretched something long and still, something that had once been a man.

"I reckon the tip was right," the sheriff said softly. "Things are wrong as hell."

Lonesome looked up, and his breath gasped between his twitching lips.

"Someone shot Sam," he said. "I found this gun in the path."

Woods dropped to one knee to examine the body. "He's been drilled through the head," he announced. "He's fired his gun, but there's no sign of a close-up fight. I figure someone he knew and wasn't afraid of called him to the door, and they shot it out."

"It's the same sort of gun that killed Long Tom," Lonesome said, still turning the weapon he had found. "Plain, without no marks on it—except this scratch."

HE drew the gun that had been Long Tom's from his holster. The two of them were like sinister twins. Woods took them with a questioning hand. The new gun was undoubtedly the one missing from the brace his father had owned. The fresh scar along its barrel showed how close a bullet of old Sam's had come to the man who had murdered him. Certainly, it must have torn the weapon from his hand and thrown it in the path where Lonesome had found it.

"This one killed Long Tom," Lonesome said. "And this one killed Sam. I bet the same man shot them both."

"I always wanted to catch that feller," the sheriff said, almost regretfully. "But I swan, I never guessed it'd be you, kid, or that you'd been hiding out that missing gun of Tom's."

"Lonesome didn't do it," said Woods. "I told you we just got here. We didn't even hear a shot."

The sheriff took the gun and examined it. "It ain't plumb cold yet," he said. "So you'll admit, stranger, you're asking a lot for me to believe."

Lonesome did not seem to know what they were discussing. He had a far-away look in his eyes. Absently, he leaned above

the gun in the sheriff's hand. The sheriff's fingers clamped on the barrel. But Lonesome only sniffed above it, as a bird dog sniffs the morning air.

"He done it," he said positively. "I knowed and I didn't know. But now I'm sure."

"Who done what?" the sheriff demanded.

"Whiskey," Lonesome announced. "Can't you smell that old Crow he oils his hands with? It's getting mighty faint; but it's there."

THE sheriff grinned. He sniffed the gun before he dropped it in his pocket.

"Sorry, boys," he said, "can't smell a thing. Besides, I seen Whiskey in Jubilee last night, shut up in a private game."

"We were in Jubilee last night, too," Woods said. "Whiskey could make it here faster than we did if he came straight. We stopped at the Tumbling T."

"But you're here, and he ain't," the sheriff pointed out.

"Then you're not going to investigate any more?" Woods demanded. "You're going to take us back to town and let the trail go cold?"

"You got it, stranger," the sheriff agreed. "I get a tip there's trouble. I follow it, and here's old Sam dead and you two over his body. The best alibi you've got is a smell I can't smell. You're a pilgrim nobody ever laid eyes on before. And Lonesome—well, we ain't considered him harmful. But there's always a first time for everything."

"Where did you get your tip?" Woods asked.

The sheriff grinned at him reprovingly. "I'm the one who asks questions around here, son. You'll get a fair trial. Put yourself in my shoes."

"They wouldn't no ways fit," Woods drawled. The silk in his voice made the sheriff reach for his gun. But his move was too late."

"Easy does it," Woods ordered. "And you, Lonesome, fetch that rope on your saddle horn. Pronto!"

Inside the cabin, Woods trussed his captive to the one crude chair.

"I hate to do this because I think you're honest, but dumb," he said. "Somewhere ahead there's a fresh trail, and we got to read it now, or it'll be too late and we'll never be able to clear ourselves.

With Lonesome's help, he brought in Sam Smith's body and laid it on the cot. While he spread a buffalo robe over it, Lonesome pumped a pail of fresh water and held a dipper for the sheriff.

"You may be here a long time," the boy said, as he set the pail on the table before him. "If you need water bad enough you can get it—dog fashion."

The sun was lifting a thin red rim above the cold horizon when they went down to the corrals.

Woods studied Lonesome speculatively. If he left him at the cabin, the sheriff would talk him into turning him loose. Then he'd land in jail on a charge of murder. In stalking the killer, the boy could only prove a handicap; and if anything should happen to Woods, he would suffer for his loyalty.

"I'll read sign about the cabin," he said. "You go back to Jubilee and check up on Whiskey. If you don't hear from me within twenty-four hours, send someone after the sheriff, here, and light out for the Border."

Dull red flowed up in the boy's cheeks. "You're just trying to get rid of me," he said, "and there ain't no use. I'm sticking."

There was no sign close to the house. The killer had not waited in the door yard, but must have hidden farther back in the shadows and hallooed the cabin until old Sam came out. Wood's guess that the man had known his murderer and gone to meet him unsuspectingly grew stronger. In the duel that followed, Sam's shot must have

torn his enemy's gun from his hand while he fled into the dawn.

As they cast about in widening circles, Wood's guess deepened to certainty. Behind a choke cherry, that commanded a view of the cabin door, he found bent grasses, free from dew, as if a man had rested on them, waiting. He eyed the spot thoughtfully. The man was about the size of Whiskey. Slowly, he followed the trail of bent grasses, that were already pulling erect, to a gully where a shod horse had waited. It took almost an hour to find where it left the gully, but, once on the prairie, the trail was an open book.

Lonesome followed his lead unquestioningly, but he kept his nose to the windward as persistently as a fox.

"We're heading for Whiskey's lodge," he said. "He's got a special corral there where he keeps that horse. But most generally, there's only one man on the place, to feed and water Dynamite."

"That won't make such heavy odds," Woods suggested.

"No," the boy agreed, sniffing the air as if reading the message it carried.

"They got a fire burning," he said, "and something under their belts to fight on. I'm emptier'n a buffalo waller in August. We'd ought to eaten them pancakes back at Sam's."

THEY tied their horses in a thicket of buckbrush and choke cherry. On foot, they advanced toward the lodge. It was set on a knoll without a tree or bush to obscure the view from the house. To the rear was a small barn and the highest and tightest corral Woods had ever seen. From the inside came a shrill trumpeting that rang on the crisp morning air like defiant brass.

"Dynamite's to home and yelling for hay," said Lonesome. "He's the meanest critter this side of hell. Don't you even look at him."

"I'm looking for Whiskey," Woods said somberly, and strode across the hard packed door yard and the worn veranda of the house.

When he kicked the door open and stepped into the kitchen, his hands were on his guns.

Whiskey sat at a table in the corner, facing them. His arms rested flat upon the table, and he did not move toward his guns. There was no one else in the room.

"Where's your man?" Woods demanded.

"He's gone to town—if it's any of your business," Whiskey answered.

His face was almost as white as the teeth that showed between his black mustaches. He leaned a little on one arm, pressing it hard against the table. "What is this? A holdup?"

"You know what it is," said Woods evenly. "We've come from what's left of Sam Smith, and we mean to do right by his memory."

He shoved his guns back in their holsters. "I'm giving you an even break," he said. "Why don't you go for your guns? We said we'd settle things next time we met."

"It don't suit me," said Whiskey, without moving his outstretched arms.

"I smell blood," Lonesome announced. "I bet Whiskey got shot when he plugged Sam. That's why he lost the gun and why it ain't suiting him to move."

Whiskey stared at him, as unwinking as a lizard in the sun.

"So you're piling the bad luck up for me, are you, Lonesome? I reckon there's just one way to cure you of talking back to me."

Under his stare, Lonesome shivered; but Woods drawled as he moved closer to the table, "The boy's right. Whoever bandaged you did a bum job. I can see blood spreading under your arm and I ain't aiming to shoot it out with a dying man."

"Save your pity," Whiskey snarled. As Woods' hand fell on his shoulder, his face

went gray and his head fell forward on his outstretched arms.

"He's hit bad," Woods said. "That's why his man's gone for help. Stir up the fire, Lonesome, and rassel something to use for bandages."

Twenty minutes later, they were still working on Whiskey's shoulder. They had had to cut away his soggy coat and they had torn his linen shirt into strips to replace the awkward bandages they found there. They probed the bullet out, washed the wound clean and staunched the flow of blood.

"I don't see why we're doing this," Lonesome protested. "His whole carkiss ain't fitten for nothing but coyote bait."

"We're not coyotes," Woods reminded him. "Some day, I aim to meet him on even terms."

"Not if he sees you first," Lonesome predicted darkly. "Whiskey don't meet folks that way."

Behind them, a genial voice said, "You told it straight, Lonesome."

They whirled on a crowded doorway, where half a dozen of the men from the Tumbling T stood with drawn guns. "The boss's friends look after them things for him, specially when we find a couple of hosses hid in the underbrush. Suppose you hoist your hands."

Slowly, their hands went up. Whiskey's eyes came open with a suddenness that told he had been conscious for a long time.

"You were mighty slow getting here," he said curtly.

"We started as soon as Red got us word you was hurt, boss," the men defended. "We like to killed our hosses."

"That's your story," Whiskey said unpleasantly. "Now tie these boys up. You, Red, get out there and feed Dynamite. He's raising thunder again."

It was true. Dynamite's hunger, or the smell of the horses drooping in the dooryard, or a combination of causes, had set him trumpeting again. But as Red swung about in bow-legged obedience, Whiskey stopped him.

"Don't feed him," he said. "I've got a better idea. He's boiling with meanness, so let him be."

HE LEANED back in his chair, his bandages white against his dark skin.

"Lonesome," he said, "has just confessed to all of us that he got in a ruckus with Sam Smith and finished him off."

"I never," Lonesome protested loudly. "It was you that done it, Whiskey, and you know it."

The man ignored him.

"There's a stand of cottonwoods between here and town," he reminded his men. "One of them's got a good strong branch a feller with a rope round his neck could ride under comfortable. I reckon his horse won't even miss him if you give it a whack."

He turned on Woods and the pupils of his eyes contracted like a cat's.

"The pilgrim—being a horse thief at heart and not knowing Dynamite—gets in the corral with him. It ain't our fault if there ain't nothing left to bury."

"You can't do that," Lonesome blurted. "Hang him decent—alongside me."

Whiskey stared at him. The deadly pallor was fading from his face. In its stead was a white blaze of anticipation.

"It's a good thing the boys are going to cure you of that habit of talking when I got business on my mind," he said. "Let's go see Dynamite."

Four of the men closed in about Woods. The other two followed, with Lonesome stumbling dazedly before them.

The corral had doors like a fort, and the cross beam that locked it would have stopped an army. As Red stepped to the pulley that lifted it, Whiskey dropped in beside Woods.

"I recollect where I saw you before, pilgrim. There was a man here awhile back, Long Tom from Texas. He owned

the Tumbling T ranch. When he committed suicide, I sort of took it over. Sam Smith bellyached about a kid of Tom's till I got tired of listening. I reckon you're that kid?"

"Do your own reckoning," Woods said shortly.

Whiskey grinned. "Too bad suicide runs in Tom's family so heavy, ain't it? Open the gate, Red, and shove him in."

The gate swung wide. As Woods stepped inside the enclosure, he heard it slam behind him and the dull thud of the falling bar. All about him, he heard tiny clicks that, he was sure, meant the opening of peepholes in the walls. No one swarmed to the top of this corral to sit at ease while they shouted encouragement or advice. They kept safe behind the thick walls and peered through miniature windows. But at the moment, Woods had eyes only for Dynamite.

The horse on the far side of the enclosure was black and almost small. It had a rough coat and its hair grew in patches of uneven length. That, and the wildness of its eyes, told Woods it was a victim of the loco weed. To its own cleverness and evil temper would be added the craft of madness. A frayed halter rope swung from its thick neck and a surcingle encircled its barrel; but there were no saddle marks on its lustreless hide.

When it saw him, the horse flung up its head and whistled, lifting its tail at an abrupt angle and pawing the air with hoofs that looked as deadly as knives. It came forward mincingly, its head held low on a neck that was as round and crooked as an advancing snake.

Woods stood still as it rose to stamp him. Then, with the lightning flash of those sharp hooves fanning the air, he darted forward, caught the end of the halter rope and flung his whole weight upon it. The unexpectedness of the attack brought the animal down, almost to its knees. Before it could recover, Woods had leaped to its back and was beating it about the ears and eyes with his Stetson.

It was a desperate chance, but he had no choice; and Dynamite hated the flailing hat. Confused, the horse went into its tricks, with a strength and wickedness Woods had never met before. But he clung like a leech, dragging on the halter rope to pull that thick neck far enough to make the animal throw itself, shouting, jeering, saving himself by a hair's breadth when the crafty black head swung suddenly and the long, yellow teeth reached back to slash and rend.

Woods felt as if his neck would snap on his shoulders. His whole body was an ache of tension as he dug his knees into the heaving barrel. Each moment, he expected to shoot to the ground or be crushed against the side of the corral.

As if from another world, he heard some one shout, "Nobody ever rode like that before, Whiskey. Let the guy go. Let him go!"

"Like hell, I will!" Whiskey answered. "If Dynamite can't finish him, I will."

THE horse's bellowing was unbroken and insane. Woods could not force his neck to a position where he could throw him. Nor could Dynamite dislodge him. The horse leaped in the air. In that split second—quivering muscle speaking to quivering muscle, desperate mind to desperate mind—Woods knew that it meant to throw itself backward and crush him. Like a cat leaping, he slid from its back; and, as he leaped, he put a terrific pull on the halter rope.

The black head bent; the fierce momentum checked; the horse plunged to the ground on its side with a thud that shook the earth. For a long moment, it lay still.

There was no sound. It was as if the watchers outside the corral closed their breath in tight lungs. Then a sigh drifted in, as audible as Dynamite's inrush of breath, as he staggered to his feet.

Jim Woods was shaken. He felt unable to ride again. But, before the horse was firm on its legs he was on its sweating back.

From the direction of the corral gate, he heard the clanking of wood and a familiar voice, "Hiyah, Tex. This way."

The corral gate swung wide and he saw Lonesome's face in a grin of triumph. The next instant the boy crumpled to the ground under a clubbed gun. But the opening remained and Woods flung Dynamite toward it. Thick neck extended, feet crashing like pistons against the packed earth, the horse bore down upon it.

Whiskey ran to meet them, the gun at his hip barking five times in shrill staccato.

Woods drove the animal straight at him, even as a bullet crashed into Dynamite's brain. The next tore a hole in Woods' side. Others sang past like angry hornets. But Whiskey had underestimated the speed and drive in the iron muscles under Dynamite's rough black coat. Like an express engine without brakes, the horse's body swept on.

The gambler went down without a sound as the falling black body struck him.

* * *

When Woods opened his eyes, he was in bed inside the lodge. Night muffled the lamplight that was dim on Lonesome's face. The sheriff sat beside him. In spite of his bandages, Woods struggled to get up; but the sheriff eased him back.

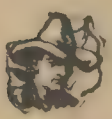
"That was some ride, boy," he said. "I got there just in time to see you tear out of the corral."

Woods asked, "Where's Whiskey, and how'd you get here?"

"Lonesome was so darned generous with his water," the sheriff explained, "I just angled myself around till I could get his rawhide rope into it. After that, it stretched easy. As for Whiskey, I reckon they'll bury him regular in Boothill. I reckon his men are half way to the Tumbling T to get their time before the new owner comes. That's you. Poor old Sam was kinda soft. He kept a dairy—I mean diary. Anyway, I found a lot of writing that said how you was the rightful owner of the Tumbling T, and how he suspected Whiskey of killing Long Tom, but couldn't do nothing about it, Whiskey having him buncoed. It was Whiskey stole Tom's guns all right, and I reckon he popped Sam off because he knowed Sam wouldn't stay hitched about who owned the ranch, once you showed up."

"Maybe," Woods nodded. His face was thoughtful as he turned to Lonesome. "And I didn't think you could help me much," he said slowly. "Tomorrow, we're riding home for keeps!"

Outlawed by the Owlhoot!



Neither the sheriff who blindly sided him, nor the renegades who hunted him could take him prisoner, Button Brewster swore. For that reckless young cowboy had signed on with the Little Boss, who needed gun-help over the Border—and he'd play out his string to the last damn shell!

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HEIR TO

By STONE CODY

There was something about the unyielding ferocity of that charge which was more than the rustlers could stand.

CHAPTER ONE

Boss of the Hardcase Crew

TOD BELLEW sat with his elbows on the scarred top of the big oak table in the living room.

"What profit did the ranch make last year?" he asked quietly.

The foreman, Ike Tolliver, tossed him a look that mingled mockery and a profound contempt. He shifted the cud of tobacco from one cheek to the other, aimed carefully at the center of the Navajo rug, which lay to his right, and spat. The stream of tobacco juice squirted for six feet through the air and splattered in a wide brown stain.

Tod Bellew's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. A muscle at the side of his jaw jumped twice, and then stilled. He said nothing, merely waited.

Ike Tolliver wiped his mouth with a work-toughened palm. "Reckon we broke about even," he said. "Or somethin' like that." His tone implied a contemptuous indifference to the questions.

"Lost some the year before; broke about even last year," Tod Bellew summed up. "An' how about this year? Where do we stand so far?"

BOOTHILL RANCH

Tod Bellew, the storekeeper, had no use for the Cross R Ranch he'd inherited. . . . But when the hardcase crew tried to run him out, before he'd laid his cards on the table, that was a horse of another color. For, even if he didn't savvy cows or sixguns, he could give them a lesson in never-say-die, cow-country fighting!

Ike Tolliver shifted his heavy, paunchy bulk in the chair and laughed offensively. "Mebbe you keep figgers that clost in store-keepin'," he said, "but this ain't no damn store."

His beady black eyes flicked at Tod Bellew as though they were looking at an insect; and his heavy-featured, big-nosed face—with its high cheekbones, which carried a hint of Indian blood—looked as though he were smelling a bad odor that sickened him.

"You're not much afraid of losin' your job, are you?" Tod asked in a tone which was quiet, almost curious.

Ike Tolliver snorted. "That ain't never been one of my worries," he said.

"An' the men?" Bellew asked suddenly. "Do they know about the provisions of Uncle Ben's will? Know they can't be fired for a year?"

"I reckon it ain't no secret," the foreman said, in the tone of one who answers the questions of a somewhat unpleasant

child. "But," he added, shifting his cud and squirting another stream of tobacco juice onto the rug, "you needn't bother about that. You can fire one of us any time you're willin' to let the ranch go over to Sally Lantry. Might save yourself some trouble, because if you don't make a profit this first year it'll go to her anyways. An' this ain't no easy spread to make a profit on."

"You seem pretty sure of it," Bellew commented softly.

The foreman shifted his cud in his mouth and turned his pursed lips toward the rug.

"Don't spit again," Tod Bellew said gently.

The tone was too quiet—quiet enough to bring Ike Tolliver's head jerking around toward him, his dark eyes stabbing and suddenly hard. But what he saw apparently did not impress him.

"You ain't runnin' no damn store now," he drawled, droop-eyed. "This here's a cattle ranch that growed-up men lives on."

Having said that, he turned his head deliberately and sent another stream of tobacco juice splattering over the rug.

Tod Bellew got up from behind the desk, the wide, spare slope of his shoulders looking suddenly dangerous.

TWO paces brought him in front of Tolliver, who watched him with an openly contemptuous grin.

"I figure I know some language you can understand," Bellew said. "Git up on your legs."

The foreman's expression changed slightly, as though a flicker of surprise had taken him aback, and then he started up in a movement so swift and supple as to be amazing in a man of his bulk. His big sledge-hammer fist preceded him, traveling for the younger man's belly.

It was so fast that it might have taken another man off guard, and it was the hard-minded, treacherous blow of a rough-and-tumble fighter whose first idea is to hit the other man when he is not expecting it. But the blow never reached Tod Bellew's unguarded groin. His own right fist ripped forward faster.

The blow hit Ike Tolliver in the left eye and knocked him over the arm of the chair to the floor.

He was on his feet like a big, overweight cat, the smooth violence of his movement bespeaking the spring-steel muscles that rippled underneath his sheathing of fat. He came in, swinging like a pile-driver. The advance checked, as two fists landed like hunks of lead thrown one after another into his face.

Yet even that did not stop him. His hard fists hammered again. And for a long minute the two men stood toe to toe and slugged fiercely—the one heavy, range-tough, muscled like a rhinoceros; the other lean, flat-bellied, with shoulders which had the long slope of power in them.

In the end, it was the older, heavier man who gave back, driven, half-dazed, by blows that had the explosive speed of dynamite in them. A smashing right sent him hurtling through the doorway into the hall. And as he struggled to his feet, a savage left slammed him, caroming against the wall, to measure his length on the veranda.

He got to his feet, desperate fists protecting his face, but Tod Bellew was merciless. He beat down the guard, and a smashing blow between the eyes sent the foreman down the steps, to stagger backward, half-stunned, and fall full length on the ground.

In a corner of his vision, Bellew had caught the sight of men running from the bunkhouse toward them, even when he had first emerged onto the porch. Now shouts ripped through the concentrated haze of his attention, yet without distracting him. He was still going forward

toward Tolliver, and knew in that instant that it was lucky he was. For the foreman, sitting up, had ripped a lightning hand to the holster at his thigh, slapping a Colt which miraculously had not fallen out. Now that hand was whipping upward, death-laden.

Bellew put all his concentration into one kick. The toe of his boot caught Tolliver's wrist. The sixgun tilted upward, exploding, its slug howling close over his head, and then sailed over Tolliver's head into the dust behind him.

"Get up, you murderin' dog," Bellew clipped, and reached for his foreman's wrist, jerking the heavy form upward.

His right fist moved eight inches, with his whole weight behind it. The blow looked like a swift, half-visible caress, but the impact of it did not sound like one. Tolliver's knees folded and his heavy form hit the dirt face downward and lay still.

TOD BELLEW turned to the crew, which had raced up. They were standing watching him with a curious, intent, estimating look. Aside from that, there was no expression on their faces.

His narrowed, blazing eyes flicked over them, seeing them again as he had first seen them that morning, sizing them up in a clicking, photographic panorama that took in their minutest characteristics.

It hit him then that not one of them was impressed by the licking he had given their foreman. Not one of them but believed that, in similar circumstances, he'd have taken care of himself better than Ike Tolliver had. And he knew clearly enough that this was the ultimate mark of men who were really tough, and knew also that all of them would have to be conquered separately.

And maybe in different ways. You couldn't give a physical beating to Old Sharps Tyler, who was crowding seventy, even though the wizened spidery rawhide belied his age. Nor to Whang McGee, whose hickory-knot face sat on a body which was wiry and tough but short and underweighing Tod Bellew by fifty pounds. Nor Greasy Crawford, who, instinct told him, would not fight with his fists—Greasy Crawford who was dirty, grinning, slick, tough and dangerous as a diamond back snake. Maybe to the red-headed, buck-toothed Horse Heggie, who had a whinnying, witless laugh but looked as though dynamite inhabited his stringy muscles. Or to Windy Hacker. . . .

These were perceptions rather than thoughts, that ripped through his mind with the speed of lightning. Ripped through almost before his lips could form the challenging, "Well?" with which he greeted them.

They were all silent for one staring, hard-eyed moment; then Windy Hacker's loud mouth brayed out. "Look at him strut like a durn rooster because he whupped a man twict his age," he sneered. "Why don't you pick on somebody that could give yuh a little fun, store clerk?"

"Like you?" Bellew snapped.

"Like me."

Bellew reached him in one stride, with a left that licked out like a tongue of flame.

The blow landed like the impact of a club on raw meat, and the right that followed shook Windy Hacker to his heels. Shook him, but did not knock him off his feet or stop the action of his big flailing fists.

The fight that followed never lived in any great detail in Tod Bellew's mind. It took only a minute of toe to toe slugging to convince him that this big-mouthed, bull-necked Hacker was more than just six foot two of wind, that his two-hundred and twenty pounds was mostly hard, fast muscle, and that he was among those rare loud talkers that had plenty with which to back their talk.

He knew that he had taken on something that would call for all his skill and fighting mind. And after the next two minutes, he knew that working in a store was all well and good for a few minutes' fighting but that it did not build enough stamina for long going. He had already had one fight that had taken plenty out of him, and no handicap was needed before a scrap with a ton of hell on the hoof like this.

He had that idea through a red haze, and then a whamming fist caught him over the eye and sent him measuring his length on the ground.

HE GOT up fast, stopped a rush with a shrewd and vicious left, and landed a right to the jaw which missed being a knockout by a small half inch.

It knocked Hacker back. But, with the knowledge that he had missed a knockout, something like despair came into Bellew's laboring breast. For an instant there was a black cloud of exhaustion over his eyes, and in that instant Hacker came in.

A series of savage blows kept him blind, and then something that he hardly felt exploded between his eyes, and the ground reared up and slapped the back of his head.

For an instant he lay still. Then, desperately, he flopped over on his face and got to his knees. Fury flooded through him and whipped him to his feet.

He whirled, lashed out with his left, and took a sledge-hammer slash on the jaw. This time his knees buckled under him and he hit the ground on his face and stayed longer.

Instinct alone pulled him to his feet then. He saw a form in front of him and hit at it. His fist flailed air. Then his vision cleared a little and he could make out Windy Hacker, looking queer, with his face ripped and bloody and strangely swollen out of shape, but with the look in his blue eyes queerer still. He slammed left and right at it, and felt it go back from his fists. Then something beat at his hands and something else clouted in on the swollen ache that was his jaw.

He teetered on his heels, felt the dim impact of another blow, which seemed to slug his brain, and found himself eating dust, choking on it, drawing it feebly up his nose.

He got up again.

Even to himself that did not seem possible, but there he was, wavering on his feet and there was a swimming red mass that was Windy Hacker's face before him. He swung at it and missed.

"Quit it," a desperate, almost frightened voice gasped at him. "By God, I won't knock you down again. Quit it."

He realized vaguely that this was Windy Hacker's voice.

He twisted his head a little. One of his eyes evidently was closed, and the other was a slit through which he could hardly see, but he could make out Hacker then, and he said, through stiff, pillow-like lips, "You yeller-bellied windbag, stand up and fight." And then he rushed, swinging.

Something tapped, feather-like and leaden, at his jaw, and light and darkness rioted in his brain. And the darkness won.

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl of the Cross R

WHEN he woke up he was lying on something soft, and somebody was putting something cold on his face. His fists balled and he tried to sit up, but the whirling in his head forced him to lie down again.

A soft quick voice reached his ears: "Don't! Don't try to move."

He recognized that voice, and instantly tried to sit up again, because the sound of

it aroused all the latent hostility in him. But the whirling beat him a second time.

Then, forcing the husky ghost of his voice through the stiff obstruction his lips made, he said, "What are you doin' here? Let me alone, will you?"

The girl, Sally Lantry, said in a voice that sounded somehow unsteady, "Please keep quiet. You—you've been hurt."

He tried to open his eyes, to glare at her, but no sight came. For a second, a quick terror of blindness swept him. Then he realized what had happened.

"Listen," he whispered. "There's a razor on the shelf in my room. Get it and slit the swelling under my eyes where it's worst. Hear?"

Her answering voice sounded panicky. "Oh, I couldn't!"

Anger grew in him. "Do as I say, damn it," he husked. "What are you tryin' to do—keep me blind?"

There was a moment of silence, and then her hesitant footsteps. After a moment she was back at his side. "I—I've got it," she said tremulously. "What do you want me to do."

"Make a slit where it's blackest and most swollen—under each eye, and over if it looks like you have to—an' let the black blood off."

He could feel her hesitate and draw a deep, shaky breath. "Go on," he said impatiently. Then there was the barely perceptible slicing of the razor edge through his swollen skin and the girl's sobbing.

HE lay still, feeling the black blood drain away, while his thoughts circled in a round of helpless anger. He had missed licking Windy Hacker, and so he was a fool. Now, on top of that, he had to endure the irritation of being tended by this girl. This—this scheming little interloper!

The thought shunted his anger away from the present and back to the dead person of his uncle, Ben Ralston. Why, he wondered bitterly, hadn't the old lobo merely left him the ranch, without all these fool strings tied to it. He had to run it for a year, without really being able to run it, without being able to fire anybody or make any changes in the normal set-up. Furthermore, he had to make a profit on it, although the old man himself had not been able to do so for two years.

If he failed in any of these conditions, the whole property would go to this girl! And he couldn't even get rid of her. "The Cross R is her home, until my nephew proves his right to it," the will had said, "and if he refuses to allow her to stay, the property automatically becomes hers."

When the will had been read to him, he had laughed, realizing how this little baggage had wormed herself into the confidence and affections of old Ben. The only wonder was that she had not been able to persuade Ben to give her the inheritance outright. No fool like an old fool.

Tod Bellew hadn't wanted the ranch. Perhaps he would have refused it, except that it was too valuable a property to be tossed away like that. But he'd made up his mind instantly, on hearing the will, to sell out at the end of a year, when the spread became really his.

It would have been different if Sally Lantry had been related to Ben. But she was merely the daughter of some busted old saddle partner of his, who had died about six months before Ben and, out of the mists of the past, had claimed friendship to the extent of getting Ben to take care of the girl.

Tod Bellew had half expected her to have the decency to disclaim any right to the inheritance and to move out when he moved in, but she had showed no signs of it. On the contrary, it was obvious that she meant to stick and collect if she could. No, there was no mistake about her being the mercenary kind of little wheedler that would work on Ben in his dotage to put her in his will.

All that would have seemed bitterly funny to Tod Bellew, if it hadn't been for the situation he found at the ranch. He would have taken the ranch over and run it better than his Uncle Ben could have—and made his profit without difficulty. Because he knew something about business and efficiency, and Uncle Ben—curly wolf of the old range though he might have been—did not. But the complication was, obviously, that the whole crew of punchers, from foreman down, had fallen under the domination of Sally Lantry. And all of them had determined to make it so tough for Tod Bellew that he would fail and Sally Lantry would inherit.

He couldn't fire them, and it was going to be tough to dominate them. If they had been an ordinary crew he might have gotten away with it. But Ben Ralston, no doubt out of some senile vanity about being a hard hombre, had hired his hands tough and ornery.

Lying there, with his puffed eyes closed, Tod Bellew knew that the hostility of these men was his only real problem—and that, so far, it looked as though he would muff it.

FEELING the blood drain out, he put his fingers up and forced his lids open. He found that they would stay open by themselves.

The first thing he saw was Sally Lantry, looking at him with a curious expression on her face and open anxiety in her eyes. "Did—did I do it right?" she asked.

He sat up suddenly and looked at her, hard-eyed, out of a vision which a dark wetness kept blurring.

"I—I—don't you think I ought to put some sticking plaster on it."

Tod took the sticking plaster roughly out of her hands. "I can attend to myself now," he said coldly. "Thanks a lot."

He stood up, aching all over, with hammers of pain going in his bruised face and battered skull. Standing before the mirror, irritation running through him at the consciousness of her continued presence, he fixed the cuts on his eyes.

After a little, he whirled on her. "You're kind of hard to get rid of, ain't you?" he said deliberately.

For a second it seemed to him, through his bloodshot vision, she went pale. Then her face took on a prim, over-sweetly innocent expression. "You say that because I stay on here, don't you?" she said meltingly. "You wouldn't want me to disobey Uncle Ben's last wish, would you?"

Uncle Ben! He felt a helpless fury riding him. It wasn't enough for her to mock, she had to underline it so that he would know she thought him a fool.

"Listen, my sweet little scorpion," he said, with what he hoped she'd recognize as cold contempt. "He wasn't your Uncle Ben. He wasn't anything to you, except somebody you could make a fool of."

He glared at her redly through his slitted swollen lids.

"Don't think I miss any of it," he went on, with elaborate sarcasm. "I can see the deep-vine deep blue eyes, like cornflowers in June, and the angelic face, with the skin softer and more light-catching than the pink of a dove's throat. I can see the soft lips that have got plenty character in them—oh, plenty!—and the little chin that hides its toughness under so much delicateness. And I'm not missin' any of the curves, or the cute little sway to the walk. But listen, lady, I've seen 'em before, lots of places. They don't mean anythin' to me. I'm not fooled at all."

For an instant, he had the bitter satisfaction of thinking that he had struck home, because it seemed to him that she had blanched and shrunk backward a little.

Then her eyes sparkled at him. "I reckon you think I'm just a siren," she said, mincing a little in her speech and manner. "My, my! Do you think I could be?"

The satire in her look changed to a queer, tender kind of mirth.

"Thanks for all the pretty left-handed compliments, anyway," she said softly. "I—I'd like to think I deserve some of them."

Pain was hammering through his head, and his nerves were raw with that as well as with his resentment. Who was this interloping, scheming, mercenary little petticoat to mock him so? Whatever troubles, whatever humiliating defeats he'd had, were her fault.

All of it, all the hammering blows and screaming flesh, spoke out of him.

"You deserve them, all right," he said. "From Uncle Ben. It's not hard to guess what you were to him."

IT WAS as though he had struck her with his fist. It was as though he had lashed her with a blacksnake whip. Her face went deadly pale. Then her blue eyes were blazing at him.

"I think," she said, with difficulty, "that you will deserve anything that comes to you, Tod Bellew." And then she turned on her heel and went swiftly out of the room.

For just a second, Bellew was aghast at himself, a second that was made poignant by the impression that he had heard a sob as her footsteps beat down the hallway. Then the hot anger in him flooded his feeling and effaced it. Effaced it, yet left a curious impression swirling in the whirlpool of his emotions—an impression, strange and unreasonable, of intimacy, of a lovers' quarrel. The thought was too insane to be borne. He must be going entirely out of his mind.

Abruptly he turned, strode down the hall and out onto the porch. The ranch crew was hunkered down before the bunkhouse, doing nothing. His raging steps took him toward them.

"What the hell do you think I pay you for, you damn lunkheads?" he snarled. "Fork leather an' get to work. "You, Hacker—where are you?"

A beef-red and purple face showed itself in the bunkhouse door.

"Step out an' put up your hands," Bellew snapped.

Windy Hacker goggled at him, then stepped forward, a certain belligerency mingling with the unbelief in his eyes. Tod led with a stinging left and then slammed his right to a swollen cheekbone. Windy Hacker hit the wall beside the bunkhouse door and bounced forward, his fist whipping outward. For an agonizing, flailing, grunting thirty seconds, they stood toe to toe, slugging.

Then Windy's fist caught Tod, a little off-balance, squarely between the eyes. The blow opened up all his cuts, and as he staggered forward again blindly, something exploded on his jaw. For a moment on the ground he fought the black paralysis that held his mind and muscles, and then there was no longer any fight. Only blackness. . . .

This time when he came to and fixed his cuts again, he found, a little to his surprise, that the crew had gone out to work.

Down at the corral, he came upon Sally Lantry, still looking a little pale and more than a little cold. There was an impulse in him to apologize to her, but he fought it down. Why should he apologize? She meant nothing to him.

"Where'd they go?" he demanded curtly.

"I reckon over to the west range," she told him expressionlessly. "At least, they rode west."

He caught out a horse, which luckily proved to be an easy one, and rode west. He had meant to stay in that afternoon and go over such accounts as Ben Ralston had managed to keep. But that wouldn't do. The crew would have thought he had been too badly beaten to ride.

But about all he saw that day was cat-

tle and landscape. He noted both methodically, and hoped that the sun would not delay too much about going down.

CHAPTER THREE

Rich Pickings for Rustlers

AT DUSK, he rode into the ranchyard and found the hands already in.

"I thought you rode west," he said, hard-eyed, to Ike Tolliver, who was at the corral fence.

Tolliver eyed him speculatively, but the nuance of contempt was somehow lacking. "We swung north a little," he said. "I wanted to chouse some stuff out of the breaks of the Little Dry."

Tod got down from the saddle, trying to disguise the pain that shot through him as he called on his hammered muscles.

"There's some cows on the west range that are gettin' too close to the bogs," he said. "Better get out in the mornin' an' see that none of them have got mudded down. An' set a fence aroun' them bogs. There's good graze at the south and east. No use in wastin' it."

He had the satisfaction of seeing Tolliver goggle at him, and then, slapping his horse into the corral, he looked around for Windy Hacker. But Windy wasn't in sight. There was only Whang McGee, lounging against the corral fence. As Tod looked at him, his eyes went expressionless and his face wooden. He spat deliberately in Tod's direction and then swaggered off toward the bunkhouse.

Tod eyed him narrowly and then walked, stiff-legged, toward the ranchhouse. Deep down in himself, he was glad that Windy Hacker was not in sight. He was tired, mortally tired.

At the big house, when he sat down wearily at the table, he saw that it had probably been set for two. A chair was placed opposite his, and on the table cloth he could see the faint mark of a plate that had rested there but a short time before.

It was obvious that Sally Lantry had been expected to eat with him, but that she had changed the orders. It occurred to him then that strict etiquette of the range would require him to sleep in the bunkhouse, so that there could be no shadow on the girl's reputation. His swollen lips twisted into a grimace that at another time would have been a grin. Maybe she'd like to move out into the bunkhouse. Or, more shortly, just move out.

He got the food down somehow, scarcely knowing how, and then he went to bed—in Ben Ralston's room in the big house.

Dawn light found him still aching. He got out of bed, cursing the stabbing ache of his muscles and the painful throbbing of his face, but exultant nonetheless because the resiliency of his young and powerful energy had not failed him.

He was feeling almost good and more than a little cocky when he finished a hasty breakfast and walked out into the yard. Windy Hacker was there, moving, a little stiffly, toward the corral with the others.

Tod walked up to him and said briefly, "Put up your hands, Hacker."

Windy stared at him, drew up his six foot two and the forbidding width of his chest and stepped backward, his hands coming up in a gesture that was more hesitant than belligerent.

At the side somebody breathed, "The durned jasper is loco!"

But Tod was not listening. He threw his left at Windy, following through with his right, and missed both blows. Hacker had both hands really up now and both were working, but the look in his eyes was less warlike than baffled.

Nevertheless, by instinct, he ripped out with a crashing left, hit air, and took Tod's right between the eyes. The blow staggered him, and then Tod's left took him on the jaw, exploding like a blast of dyna-

mite. Windy went down, his eyeballs swiveling. Automatically, he shoved himself to a sitting position and sat staring at Tod Bellew.

"Git up an' fight," Tod breathed.

But Windy only sat staring at him.

"Git up, damn yuh!" Tod snarled.

Windy shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "I've had enough. I may be a damn loud-mouthed fool, but I know when I've had enough."

TOD took a long but quick breath and then turned on Ike Tolliver. "You got posts an' wire for them bogs?" he demanded sharply.

Ike Tolliver looked at him, and all the contempt was gone from his eyes, but in its place was a narrow-lidded look which had in it both hatred and—danger.

"Yeah," he said slowly, "there's wire an' there's posts. . . . Greasy, you an' Horse git out the wagon. We're wirin' the bogs by the Big Wet."

Tod said with quiet deliberation, "Tolliver, I told you last night that we'd close in the bogs. When I give an order I aim to have you carry it out pronto, without havin' to have no second talk about it."

Ike Tolliver's big chest heaved once above his paunch and then was still. "We're fencin' the bogs," he said quietly. "No need to git yourself haired up."

"See that you do," Tod said grimly, and walked toward the corral.

The last of the crew had roped out horses and were ready to ride, so he hurried a little and missed his first cast. The quick-footed, intelligent-looking bay he had chosen evaded the loop and mixed with the milling bunch at the other side of the corral. Tight-mouthed, Tod rebuilt his loop and cast for the first horse that passed him, a roman-nosed, down-headed dun that ran with a quick, awkward, powerful gait.

The horse stood, meek and droopy-eared, while he threw his saddle on it. He was conscious, vaguely, of a queerly intense silence in the group around him. And then he saw Sally Lantry. Her eyes met his, not with coldness but with a quick, alarmed warning in them.

But he had no time to wonder what about that. His punchers were waiting for him. He swung into the saddle.

Instantly, the horse broke in two under him. The first spine-disjointing buck caught Tod unaware. The next, a hurtling leap followed by a stunning sunfish, put him clean loose from the saddle. And the following buck hit him like an exploding shell and sent him sailing, arms and legs spraddled, to hit the hard dirt of the yard with an impact which seemed to split him in two.

He lay breathless and stunned for a long moment. Then, gasping, he got to his feet. The roman-nosed dun had stampeded, carrying the saddle with him. About him, the circle of punchers was an arc of grins, some suppressed, others open.

"All right," he thought to himself bitterly, "now they know I'm not a rider. What of it? Maybe I will be sometime."

He walked, staggering a little, to the harness shed, where there was a spare lass rope and saddle.

At the corral fence he said to Windy Hacker, who was nearest him, "Go ride down that cayuse an' get the saddle."

Windy looked at him queerly, but he obeyed silently.

Tod caught out the bay horse and put the saddle on him. When he climbed up, the horse stood still under him.

He looked around the circle. "All right, you jaspers," he said, hard-voiced. "Line out. There ain't one of you fit to waste skunk smell on, but I've got to keep you for a year—and, by God, durin' that time, you'll work."

He said that fast, almost before he had had time to look at them. And almost at once he had the queer, sinking feeling in his stomach that a man has when he has made a bad mistake. Before he spoke

there had been something like respect in their eyes, but afterwards there was nothing but hardness and hostility.

They rode, and the work of tailing up the cattle that had got bogged down and of fencing in the bogs went on slowly, with a reluctance which was obvious but which left him no good handle to hang his furious resentment on.

THAT was the way the work went on from day to day. Nothing he could take hold of much but, somehow, something always managed to go wrong, or, if not wrong, then with maddening slowness.

When he gave orders, they obeyed, but somehow the orders were not quite carried out. There was some misunderstanding. Or else, the man, having done almost nothing, looked at him hard-eyed and said brazenly that he had done his best.

Still, there was hope as well as a savage determination in him. He wasn't altogether ignorant about range work. He had done some of it before he had made his decision to go into storekeeping. And he was no fool. The work was getting done badly, but it was getting done. And, in the end, he'd win out, even over this silent hostility.

It wasn't until two months later that he got his first real shock. During that time he had endured more than one humiliation. He had shown, with a scarifying clarity, that he did not know how to handle a rope; that, in addition to not being able to ride a tough horse, he knew almost nothing about the actual technique of range work. And somehow he had horsed through it, preventing them, by the sheer prestige of his victory over Tolliver and Windy Hacker, from trying to run an open ranny over him.

During that time, he had held some kind of converse with everybody except Sally Lantry. She had avoided him rigidly. Wong Lee, the chink cook, had taken her meals to her room with cheerful regularity. And Tod had made no attempt to interfere.

It was not until the visit of Lemuel Fricker, the lawyer, that she voluntarily spoke to him. Fricker came ostensibly to pay a friendly call, but it was obvious enough that his real purpose was to see how things were getting along and just what would happen under the provisions of Ben Ralston's will.

"Ben," the lean lawyer said drily, "was a shrewd man—an unusually shrewd man." He rubbed the palms of his hands together so that they sounded to Tod Bellew like the scales of a rattlesnake scraping over rock. "Ben knew human beings as very few men know them. And he was not a man to take any step without good reason."

His eyes, which walled a little, swung significantly and disjointedly at Tod.

Tod, watching him with distaste and in thorough disagreement, said nothing. After a few more desultory remarks, Lem Fricker took his leave.

Sally Lantry had been there, as of right, during the interview. When Fricker had gone, Tod looked at her grimly.

"My opinion an' Fricker's don't run together," he said.

Sally turned the full light of her amazingly blue eyes on him. "Mine and his do," she said tranquilly.

Tod felt his whole being harden. "Very interestin'," he remarked ironically, "but I'm afraid it doesn't make much difference. I'm goin' to make a profit this year, an' after that I don't think you'll be around much."

Sally Lantry shrugged only slightly. "If the rustlers don't take too much of a hand," she said quietly.

Tod Bellew stared at her. "Rustlers?" he repeated. "What rustlers?"

The girl's eyes widened a moment and then she leaned forward, suddenly intent.

"You don't mean—you know, don't you, that your cattle are being rustled?"

Tod glared at her. "What in hell are you talkin' about."

She drew a long breath. "I thought you knew," she said queerly. "Everybody else does."

Tod leaned toward her, with his jaw outthrust. "What are you tryin' to pull?"

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Then why hasn't Tolliver said anything about it—or anybody else?"

"Maybe it's because you've—antagonized them."

He snorted. "I didn't have to antagonize them. That was already done for me before I got here. But, by God—" He ripped to his feet, his eyes blazing. "Somebody will explain why he hasn't talked—an' plenty!"

She caught her breath visibly. "You—you mustn't be too—"

But he wasn't listening. He was already striding out, and down to the bunkhouse.

TOD slammed through the door. Heads snapped sharply towards him and faces froze instantly into the watchful expressionlessness which he had come to associate with them.

He picked out Ike Tolliver, and snapped, "Have any of our cattle been rustled?"

Tolliver shifted his cud deliberately and spat on the bunkhouse floor. "Consid'-able," he drawled.

"An' why haven't I been told about it?"

"Well, that fust day, you didn't give me much chanct to tell you," Tolliver said. "Unless I disremember, before we had a chanct to talk much you threw me out. Since then you ain't asked no questions. You just been tellin' us."

His beady black eyes flicked sardonically to those of Tod Bellew, and then his hand closed on the butt of a sixgun which lay on the bunk beside him. It was evident that he had read sudden and immediate danger in their cold blaze.

"Don't make any mistake," he said, and the dryness of his tone carried a warning which the words did not quite contain. "It's my job to look out after rustlers. You don't have to get het up about 'em."

Tod Bellew knew all at once that Ike would not hesitate to shoot him, rather than take another licking.

He drew his breath in deeply and held it. When he let it go, he said quietly, curtly, "Come up to the house. I want to talk to you about this."

In the big living room Ike Tolliver proved talkative yet somehow evasive. Watching him, narrow-eyed, Tod could not quite make him out. He seemed interested and willing to cooperate, yet there was a subtle impression of insincerity. The rustling had begun, he said, before Ben Ralston died. Ben had been a lot worried about it and had tried to run it down but hadn't succeeded. And where Ben couldn't succeed, it was hard for any man to do so.

Then Ben had got sick and died. Tolliver would have told Tod about the rustling that first day, only Tod had been so hot and fiery. But that didn't mean that he, Ike Tolliver, hadn't been on the job. The trouble was, the durn cattle thieves were too slick for anybody. They always struck when the crew was on some other part of the range. And they didn't take many cows at a time. By the time anybody discovered the theft, it was two or three days afterwards, and by then the trail was too cold to follow. On a range the size of this and with the number of head they had on it, it wasn't possible to keep a close tally every minute. That was why the thing was so hard to beat.

What sign they had found led right back into the badlands and was quickly lost. That was outlaw territory, anyway, and it wasn't healthy for anything like a posse to go projecting around in there.

Tolliver figured that they were being bled by a band of outlaws who just used the ranch as a meal ticket while they were hiding out. Likely they sold a few head somewhere for cash and used the rest for food.

It all sounded reasonable enough.

But when his foreman was gone, Tod Bellew sat for a long time with his eyes narrowed and his mind coldly sorting over the facts. This was all a little too much of a coincidence. It wasn't like ordinary rustling, in which the thieves tried to make as much profit as possible. This was a slow bleeding of a kind which would be just sufficient to make him show a loss and lose him his inheritance.

He guessed instantly that Ike Tolliver was mixed up in it, and he wondered if the rest of the crew was. It was plain enough that they were all out to lick him and to give the inheritance to Sally Lantry. So why would they boggle at a little rustling?

He decided that he could afford to trust nobody.

And that was going to make it tough. It was hard enough for him to keep these men at their work. Yet the rustling had to be stopped, and there was only himself to stop it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke at Dawn

TOD got up restlessly and began to pace the room, his feet unconsciously treading across the brown stain which still remained on the Navajo rug from that first day's fight with Ike Tolliver.

Then suddenly the violent thrust of his pacing stopped dead. Suppose it wasn't rustlers up in the hills! Suppose it was somebody on this range! He thought of Ferd Jenkins, who ran the J Cross 8, to the east of his own spread. A quick thrust of excitement throbbed through him. It wouldn't be hard to change Cross R into J Cross 8. In fact, it would be easy as falling off a log.

Rapidly, his mind pieced together what he knew of Ferd Jenkins. He had only seen the man once—a blocky, tough, driving sort of hombre, whose whole manner said that he knew what he wanted and went after it straight.

He put Ferd down as a likely suspect.

Then there was Carter, of the Moonstone. That wouldn't be such an easy brand to change to. Of course, it was a possibility, but he put Carter temporarily aside. If his hunch was right, the cattle were not going up into the badlands to stay. There was no graze or water for them there, and driving them through would be too hard a task.

No. That was why so few had been taken. Because a neighboring rancher could not afford to have people think that his herd was growing too fast.

Abruptly his mind flashed to Godfrey Boardman, who ran the Windowpane B, to the west of Cross R range. Cross R could be changed into Windowpane B even more easily than into J Cross 8.

Some irrational thing in Tod fixed on Boardman as the man who was rustling his cattle. It was not thought out. It was immediate, like an intuition. He knew Boardman better than Jenkins. More than once, Boardman had come to the Cross R to see Sally Lantry. He was a big, flashing-eyed, handsome man. Tod had disliked him at once, partly out of some profound, instinctive natural antagonism, partly because he figured that anybody who was a friend of Sally Lantry could not be much good.

It never occurred to him that this might be jealousy. He'd have laughed at the idea. Jealous of Sally Lantry! Why, he had nothing but contempt for her. A chiselling little female on the make, even willing to take advantage of a doddering old man! What did her beauty matter to

him? What did the strange, tender look he surprised sometimes in her eyes matter? He wasn't the man to be taken in by that stuff, even if old Ben Ralston had been!

It came to him in a sudden flash that Ben, too, had guessed that this rustling was being done by a neighboring rancher; and that one or more of his own crew had been involved in it. But he had been too sick and old to do anything about it. He had wanted it solved, so he had left it to him, Tod Bellew, to solve it.

Anger lifted in him at the thought. Why then had Ben made it as difficult as he could? Why hadn't he left the ranch outright to his nephew, warned him of the rustling and allowed him to take care of himself? The old fool! Well, there were no answers to those questions—except senility. So to hell with Ben Ralston, if he wasn't already there. . . .

Grim-mouthed, hard-eyed, Tod went to the old man's gun rack and took out of it two sixshooters and cartridge belts with holsters. He crossed the belts about his waist and tied the holster thongs snugly on his thighs.

He stood looking at himself in the mirror of the big room, noting that the belts fit him as though he and old Ben were exactly of a size.

He was not a gunman—had never pretended to be one. It was true that when he was a kid he had practiced a lot with a sixgun, and the natural speed of his reactions had given him a fairly fast draw, but he had never used it on anyone and so he had no idea whether it was faster than average or not. It was true also that at that time he had been a pretty good shot; and probably still was—for that was the kind of thing which, like riding a bicycle or swimming, you did not forget.

He had given it all up, though, when he had gone into the store business—given it up as something childish, as of no real use to him in the life he planned for himself. Now, however, he told himself, tight-lipped, things were not the same. The circumstances had altered, so he must alter with them.

NEXT day he wrapped the belts and guns in a bundle and went out, tying the bulky package behind his saddle. He let the men go off to work without him, and sought a different part of the range, one that bordered the badlands.

Up there, he unlimbered the guns and did some practicing. His draw had slowed up, he found, but his aim was still good. Give him a week or so, he thought coldly, and Ike Tolliver would do well to be careful how he put his thick, black-haired, threatening paw on a sixgun!

From then on, he kept the sixguns concealed always, but he attached a rifle boot to his saddle and rode openly with a Winchester within quick grasp of his hand.

The men eyed this weapon with blank yet estimating eyes and said nothing. He could not make out what their expressions meant.

He evolved a system of sending them off to one part of the range and announcing that he was going to another. At frequent intervals he would appear suddenly to see if they were doing the work he had set for them. Often enough, he found that they were shirking it, but one or two grim-mouthed, quiet talks about that improved the situation. He was not fool enough to think that they had given into him, but he saw that for some reason they did not care to buck him openly. They preferred, rather, to go ahead with their work and even to do a fair job of it, rather than tangle with him.

This attitude, as the weeks and months wore on, puzzled him a little. And, way down deep, it made him anxious. It was as though they were merely waiting for something, for some disaster which would deliver him into their hands and which too open resistance might spoil.

He had put them at making a tally of his cattle, and, from time to time, he kept them at that. He wanted to know exactly where he stood. And the news he got was not too encouraging. As things stood, when he made his sale in the fall, he might find he'd made no profit at all. At least, the margin would be narrow.

He was not losing any more cattle, for the moment, as far as he could make out. But he hadn't any idea that the thing would really stop.

He was right about that. It began again. He had tried to hide his movements from the crew, descending on them only often enough to be sure that they were carrying out his orders. And because he was riding wide and continually, at all hours, night and day, the rustlers seemed to have quit their depredations. For Tod, that was evidence enough that the treachery was in his own crew and on the range nearby.

He could not, he knew, conceal it from his hands that he went to the corral and saddled up at all hours of the day and night. He could scarcely have concealed from anybody who saw him, day after day, the fact that he was getting more and more gaunt and worn.

But he was content. As long as he could keep things as they were, he knew he'd stand a chance of winning. At the end of the year he might have enough cattle to sell to make a clear profit. And Sally Lantry, who was a beautiful, scheming gold digger, could go back to whereever she came from.

He saw little enough of her during that time. She kept to her part of the house. Sometimes when she met him she flashed him a smile. But he was too busy to notice her. He was too busy even to notice that she was absent from the ranch most of the day; that, as soon as he and the men left in the morning, she saddled up and spent the day on the range.

Once he saw her in the distance, and his lips pressed together while his eyes narrowed in suspicion, but she disappeared and he did not find her again.

And then one day she stopped him in the hall and said, "There's some stuff up in the southwest breaks of the Cloudy that ought to be choused out, I think. I rode up there today and saw them."

He stared at her, divided between hostility and curiosity.

"That's bad country," she said hastily. "You ought to be careful how you—ride it."

Still he stared at her, narrow-eyed, until she turned away.

THAT next morning Tod got up at three o'clock and rode out onto the range. His vague, bitter idea was that Sally wanted him to show up out there in daylight, to get him into trouble of some kind. He would just beat that game by getting there early. Then, whoever she had waiting for him, would be taken a little by surprise.

What happened was that, just a little before dawn, he ran into rustlers. There was a swift, deadly, powder-blasting moment, when somebody grunted in the half-dark and fell from his horse, and when lead seared Tod's ribs, and hoofs pounded wildly away behind the cover of the cottonwoods that lined the creek. And then silence. All that was left was the body of a man he had never seen before and who was extremely dead.

He rode back, knowing that rustling would be a good deal more cautious now and wondering whether Sally Lantry had enough crooked smartness in her to have sent him out on an errand which might have meant his death.

He still didn't know when she met him at the ranch and cried out, "Oh, Tod, you're hurt!" She was hollow-eyed and anxious.

She dressed his wound with hasty, trembling fingers. And you would have

thought that she was his—wife. . . . But she couldn't get to him that way. He told himself that he wasn't impressed.

But the men were. When he came out, after having refused a doctor, they looked at him with a curious respect.

After that, until almost the end, nothing happened.

No more rustling. No open resistance from this crew. Nothing a man could take hold of. Only, somehow, there was more of Sally Lantry. She still didn't take her meals with him. She still did not see him except by accident. Only, the accidents became more frequent. He felt her presence in the house more and more. It bothered him and irritated him and, somehow, without his ever admitting it to himself, comforted him.

He didn't know quite how much it did comfort him until the night that Godfrey Boardman came to call. Sally, he saw, greeted him almost coldly. For the first time, Tod realized that Boardman, who had come frequently enough in the early months, had not been to the ranch for a long time.

Tod eyed them, with his long lips set solidly and wickedly, and then stomped away from the porch where they sat in the twilight.

He suspected Boardman more than anybody else. And he had some reason for it now; for, from time to time, a Windowpane B man drifted over to chew the fat with the Cross R crew, and once he had caught Ike Tolliver talking in whispers with one of them out near the corral in the dark.

He told himself that he had no interest in Boardman, other than as a possible danger to his spread, but, even so, he was pretty sure now of winning out. The rustling had stopped, it appeared, and when he had won out and got the Cross R for his own, Boardman could do what he pleased. He could marry Sally or jump in the creek. Tow wasn't interested.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Cross R Rides to War

TOD had until the last day of the year, under the will. . . . That was a day on which he got up and drew in his breath deeply in triumph.

He stalked out, that dawn, into the ranchyard and looked at his crew.

"You've been skunks," he said bitterly, "but it's too late now. You've tried to lick me, but I've won. Day after tomorrow I can fire every damn one of you. And I'm goin' to. But you're the crew of this ranch for one day more. Get the hell out and do some work."

They listened to him in silence, and when he had finished no man moved and no man spoke.

He was aware as he turned away that Sally Lantry was there, looking at him, with something between warning and pain in her face.

"Don't look at me," he flared at her suddenly. "You tried to horn in an' I've licked you, too. Not that I ever gave a damn whether I had the ranch or not. I'd be glad if I never see a ranch again. Tomorrow I'll sell it. Maybe you can get around the new owner, like you did Uncle Ben."

It was then that it happened. They had gathered some cattle already, the best stuff, looking toward the fall beef roundup. They had thrown them gradually onto the flats of the upper Crosstrees. And Tod had left Windy Hacker and Horse Heggie to alternate as night guards.

Now the quick rip of racing hoofs sounded and Windy Hacker slammed into camp on a heat-lathered pony.

"The herd!" he yelled excitedly. "They're takin' 'em all. Heggie's shot. There's anyway a dozen of 'em. Hit leather, you flap-eared rannies, an' let's ride."

Tod's mouth fell open. Then, a mo-

(Continued on page 108)

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But what is there left for us to do, the descendants of the hardy pioneer? What frontiers remain for us to conquer? Surely a bare fifty years have not stilled the alluring call to adventure.

Apparently not. There are still places to go, things to do, new lands to see. And no one realizes this more acutely than Harry Neel, chief of police of Carlisle, Ark. In response to *Out-Trail Caravan's* call for world adventures, Chief Neel wrote us the following letter:

Dear Editor:

I have read *Ace-High Magazine* for some years and have always enjoyed reading it. I wonder if you would do me a favor. I've been a peace officer for 15 years. Having no family, now, I would like to connect with some fruit company or oil company that would lead to my getting a job in a foreign country. Information about wages would be appreciated.

Thanking you in advance, I am

Yours sincerely,

Harry Neel,

Chief of Police, Carlisle, Ark.

Jeff Dawson, our expert on foreign countries, steps forward and volunteers the following dope in answer to Chief Neel's request:

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Now that the sun is here to stay for a while, a lot of us will become victims of that yearly ailment—spring fever. For those of us who can't break away as freely as Chief Neel, there are still a lot of places worth seeing. And it won't take much money, either.

In the Southwest it is possible to make out on $25 or $30 a month. At Taos, New Mexico, for example, you can get an adobe shack for from $8 to $12 a month. And if you don't mind Mexican food, groceries shouldn't cost more than $4 a week.

Santa Fe and such Mexican cities as Tlaxcala and Hermosillo are a few more places where living is as cheap or cheaper than Taos. The Gulf Coast of Florida and Mississippi is also quite reasonable. And one can live for a song in Arizona and parts of California.

If you'd like detailed information about some particular place, or have advice and hints that you'd care to pass on to other readers, don't forget that *Out-Trail Caravan* is the meeting place of world adventurers.

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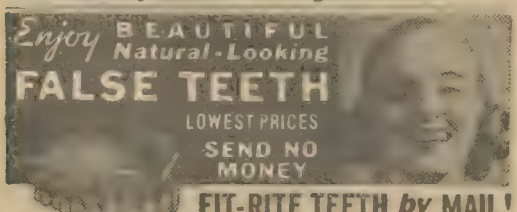

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(Continued from page 105)

ment later, his eyes narrowed in quick suspicion.

"What kind of a bluff is this you're tryin' to run, Hacker?" he snapped.

Windy Hacker's eyes blazed at him. "Yuh dang fool!" he exploded. And then, abruptly, his expression softened. He rode up to where Tod stood.

"Listen, hombre," he said quietly, "we've all been ag'in yuh. We all started out wantin' Sally to have the spread. An' we bucked you every way we knew how—all except me, that is. Me? I bucked you first an' straight. An' I got licked. An' since then, I've been on your side, though you didn't know it. But now, this is different. These are rustlers, raidin' the spread. I ain't much, but I never failed yet to back up my own spread. I'm tellin' the truth. Let's get goin'."

Tod stared at him.

Before he could say anything, Ike Tolliver spoke. "I reckon you're runnin' some kind of a sandy, Hacker," he growled, "but, what of it?" He turned and grinned at the other men. "This is what we've been waitin' on, ain't it? If the storekeeper loses, it ain't no fault of our'n. He's fired us all. What skin is it off our noses if he loses cows, an' loses out? I say let him trail his own rustlers!"

They stood uneasily a short moment, shifting on their feet. And then old Sharps Tyler spoke up, his age-bent shoulders straightening. "To hell with that!" he snapped. "I'll do some things, but, by thunder, if there's cow thieves on the range.

A quick, hoarse shout answered him, as the other hands ripped toward the corral.

Tod stood staring at them, dazed. Then he looked at Sally Lantry. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were glowing.

"Come on, Tod," she said, her voice breaking a little with emotion. "We've got to fight for Cross R now!"

"But—but," he stammered, "if we win

—the spread will be mine!"

"And it should be!" she cried at him passionately. "No man ever made a better fight for anything."

He looked at her a long moment, with his jaw dropped, and then a hot, unbelieving elation flooded him, and he whirled toward the corral.

"Come on then," he ripped out. "Let's ride!"

AND so they rode, a hard-bitten, blazing-eyed crew, following fiercely after the lean, grim-faced youngster who was their boss. They came in sight of the high dust of a hard-driven herd, and stormed after it.

Seeing them, a full dozen men deployed behind the herd, with their Winchesters making a ripping pattern of wicked sound.

It was a force to discourage most men. Against them were only six men and a girl, but only one of those six faltered. And that was Ike Tolliver. With his face hard-set and pale, he let his horse drop behind.

Tod didn't see him. He turned, to fling over his shoulder at Sally, "Keep out of this, you lovely silly fool."

"Drop back like Ike?" Sally cried. "No thanks."

Tod stared, saw the big foreman far in the rear, beginning to turn off. In the same instant, lead howled past his ear, plucked at the cloth of his shirt. . . . Five of them now—and a girl!

"Pull up," he yelled at his men. "We won't get ourselves killed over a few cows."

"The hell we won't!" Whang McGee yelled. "They're our cows, ain't they?"

Tod's throat swelled suddenly with an emotion he had never known, and he drove on, grim-mouthed. The others, he saw, had not even checked. And there was something about the unyielding ferocity of that charge which was more than the rustlers could stand.

(Continued on page 110)

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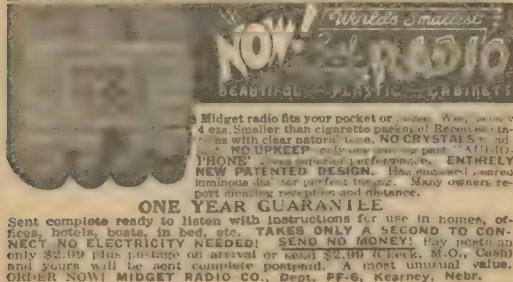

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(Continued from page 109)

One of them flung up his hands and plunged from the saddle as a bullet found its mark. Another hit dirt as his horse went down. And, all at once, the others turned tail and ran. They had no heart for this sort of fighting.

Up ahead, Tod could see a figure that looked somehow familiar.

And then he knew what he had only suspected before. This was Godfrey Boardman. This whole thing had been engineered by him, with Ike Tolliver's help. Boardman had wanted the Cross R. Boardman had dreamed of cattle empire and had schemed for it. Ben Ralston's will had given him his chance. Bleeding the Cross R had looked too doubtful, after Tod had killed one of his hirelings, so he had waited until now and had raided the range boldly, to make sure that Tod lost. After that, he probably had thought he could either marry Sally Lantry, or at least steal her ragged and run her out, she being a woman.

Tod's blood boiled suddenly. And then he saw that Boardman had waited, exhorting his men, too long.

"Pull up, Boardman," Tod yelled. "I don't want to shoot you in the back."

Startled, the rancher swung in his saddle. "Damn you, Bellew!" he yelled.

His sixgun whipped up, blasted once. Tod felt the wind of the bullet past his face. His own gun jumped in his hand. He shot once, fast, as Boardman fired again. And then slowly, carefully, he levelled his gun and aimed a second time. As he fired, a scream ripped out near him. Sally's voice! And then two shots.

His head shot around. Ike Tolliver was riding toward him, sixgun blazing, cutting in from the side. And Tod knew that his first shot might very well have scored a hit, except for Sally Lantry's cry and the shot she had sent from her light .38 gun.

He swung his gun then and fired. Ike Tolliver jerked in the saddle, swung side-

ways, then plunged to the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tod saw that Boardman, too, had left his saddle, struck out of it by that last shot of his.

He pulled up suddenly, yelling at his crew. The rustlers were racing now towards the badlands. They had passed the herd, which, by some miracle of cattle perversity, had not stampeded. And this fight was over. . . .

TOD swung his horse over toward the prone form of Ike Tolliver.

Tolliver was mortally wounded. It was obvious at first glance that he was a dying man. And Tod knew all at once that he was sorry for that.

Kneeling by the foreman's side, he said softly, "Hell, I'm sorry, Ike. I—"

"No!" The word was a gasp from the foreman's throat. "I—know what you're—thinkin'. But it ain't true. I wasn't doin' for the gal, but for pay. The boys thought I was helpin' 'em ride you like Ben wanted, but—Boardman paid me. An'—I'm glad you—won. I—I ain't much maybe—but I—like a—man."

The breath slid out of him with that last word, and Tod was looking down on a man who was dead.

When he got to his feet, Tod found Sally Lantry at his side.

"And you?" he asked, his voice suddenly gentle. "Why have you acted like you have—like a damn fool?"

She smiled at him softly. "I can tell you now," she said, "since you've won. Uncle Ben wanted a man to run the Cross R, and he wasn't sure a storekeeper was one. He asked me not to try to interfere. He made me promise to let you work it out for yourself. And if you failed and yet were a man, I was to—to give you the ranch, anyhow. You—you'll have to take my word for that, Tod. It was just between Uncle Ben an' me. You see—Uncle Ben—trusted me."

(Concluded on page 112)

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	3.35	1
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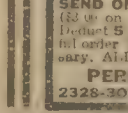

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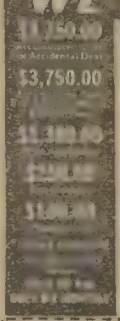

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(Concluded from page 111)

Tod Bellew drew a long breath. "An' I thought he was a dodderin' old fool!" he said softly. "Why—he had more sense than I'll have if I live to be eighty."

Sally looked at him. "You mean you won't trust me before you're eighty?"

Tod Bellew grinned all at once, his lips shaking a little. "Why, no," he breathed, holding out his arms. "Not out of my sight—until I'm a hundred and eighty."

She went into them with a little sob, and when her lips were free again and there was breath in her lungs once more, she whispered, "Uncle Ben knew a good deal. I—I reckon he figured that it didn't matter much which of us got the ranch."

THE END

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